Understanding a Photograph

John Berger

Edited and introduced by Geoff Dyer

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

Understanding a Photograph

John Berger was born in London in 1926. His acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction include the seminal *Ways of Seeing* and the novel *G.*, which won the Booker Prize in 1972. In 1962 he left Britain permanently, and he now lives in a small village in the French Alps.

Geoff Dyer is the author of four novels and many non-fiction books. He is a winner of the Somerset Maugham Prize, the International Center of Photography's 2006 Infinity Award for *The Ongoing Moment* and a 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award for the essay collection *Otherwise Known as the Human Condition*.

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to Beverly

Introduction

I became interested in photography not by taking or looking at photographs but by reading about them. The names of the three writers who served as guides will come as no surprise: Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and John Berger. I read Sontag on Diane Arbus before I'd seen any photographs by Arbus (there are no pictures in *On Photography*), and Barthes on André Kertész, and Berger on August Sander without knowing any photographs other than the few reproduced in *Camera Lucida* and *About Looking*. (The fact that the photo on the cover of *About Looking* was credited to someone called Garry Winogrand meant nothing to me.)

Berger was indebted to both of the others. Dedicated to Sontag, the 1978 essay 'Uses of Photography' is offered as a series of 'responses' to *On Photography*, published the previous year: 'The thoughts are sometimes my own, but all originate in the experience of reading her book' (p. 49). Writing about *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Berger described Barthes as 'the only living critic or theorist of literature and language whom I, as a writer, recognise'.[1]

For his part, Barthes included Sontag's *On Photography* in the list of books – omitted from the English edition – at the end of *Camera Lucida* (1980). Sontag, in turn, had been profoundly shaped by her reading of Barthes. All three had been influenced by Walter Benjamin whose 'A Small History of Photography' (1931) reads like the oldest surviving part of a map this later trio tried – in their different ways, using customized projections – to extend, enhance and improve. Benjamin is a constantly flickering presence in much of Barthes' writing. The anthology of quotations at the end of *On Photography* is dedicated – with the kind of intimate relation to greatness that Sontag cultivated, adored and believed to be her due – 'to W. B.' At the end of the first part of *Ways of Seeing* Berger acknowledges that 'many of the ideas' had been taken from an essay of Benjamin's titled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. (This was 1972, remember, before Benjamin's essay became one of the most mechanically reproduced and quoted ever written.)

Photography, for all four, was an area of special interest, but not a specialism. They approached photography not with the authority of curators or historians of the medium but as essayists, writers. Their writings on the subject were less the product of accumulated knowledge than active records of how knowledge and understanding had been acquired or was in the process of being acquired.

This is particularly evident in the case of Berger, who did not devote an entire book to the subject until *Another Way of Telling* in 1982. In a sense, though, he was the one whose training and career led most directly to photography. Sontag had followed a fairly established path of academic study before becoming a freelance writer, and Barthes remained in academia for his entire career. Berger's creative life, however, was rooted in the visual arts. Leaving school possessed by a single idea – 'I wanted to draw naked women. All day long'[2] – he attended the Chelsea and Central Schools of Art. In the early 1950s he began writing about art and became a regular critic – iconoclastic, Marxist, much admired, often derided – for the *New Statesman*. His first novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958), was a direct result of his immersion in the world of art and the politics of the left. By the mid-1960s he had widened his scope far beyond art *and* the novel to become a writer unhindered by category and genre. Crucially, for the current discussion, he had begun collaborating with a photographer, Jean Mohr. Their first book, *A Fortunate Man* (1967), made a significant step beyond the pioneering work of Walker Evans and James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), on rural poverty in the Great Depression. (*A Fortunate Man* is subtitled 'The Story of a Country Doctor', in homage, presumably, to the great photo essay by W. Eugene Smith, 'Country Doctor', published in *Life* in 1948.) This was followed by their study of migrant labour, *A Seventh Man* (1975), and, eventually, *Another Way of Telling*. The important thing, in all three books, is that the photographs are not there to illustrate the text, and, conversely, the text is not intended to serve as any kind of extended caption for the images. Rejecting what Berger regards as a kind of 'tautology', words and image exist, instead, in an integrated, mutually enhancing relationship. A new form was being forged and refined.

A side-effect of this ongoing relationship with Mohr was that Berger had, for many years, not only observed Mohr at work; he had also been the subject of that work. Lacking the training as a photographer that he'd enjoyed as an artist he became very familiar with the other side of the experience, of being photographed. With the exception of one picture, by another friend – Henri Cartier-Bresson! – the author photographs on his books have almost always been by Mohr; they constitute Mohr's visual biography of his friend. (The essay on Mohr included here records Berger's attempt to reciprocate, to make a sketch of the photographer.) His writings on drawing speak with the authority of the drawer; his writings on photography often concentrate on the experience, the depicted lives, of those photographed. Barthes expressed the initial impetus for *Camera Lucida* as photography '*against* film';[3] Berger's writing on photography hinges on its relationship to painting and drawing. As Berger has grown older, his early training – in drawing – rather than fading in importance has become a more and more trusted tool of investigation and inquiry. (Tellingly, his latest book, published in 2011 and inspired in part by Spinoza, is called *Bento's*

Sketchbook.) A representative passage in 'My Beautiful' records how, in a museum in Florence, he came across the porcelain head of an angel by Luca della Robbia: 'I did a drawing to try to understand better the expression of her face' (p. 200). Could this be part of the fascination of photography for Berger? Not just that it is a wholly different form of image production, but that it is immune to explication by drawing? A photograph *can* be drawn, obviously, but how can its meaning best be *drawn out*?

This was the goal Barthes and Berger shared: to articulate the essence of photography – or, as Alfred Stieglitz had expressed it in 1914, 'the *idea* photography'.[4] While this ambition fed, naturally enough, into photographic theory, Berger's method was always too personal, the habits of the autodidact too ingrained, to succumb to the kind of discourse- and semiotics-mania that seized cultural studies in the 1970s and '80s. Victor Burgin – to take a representative figure of the time – had much to learn from Berger; Berger comparatively little from Burgin. After all, by the time of *About Looking* (1980), the collection that contained some of his most important essays on photography, Berger had been living in the Haute-Savoie for the best part of a decade. His researches – I let the word stand in spite of being so thoroughly inappropriate – into photography proceeded in tandem with the struggle to gain a different kind of knowledge and understanding: of the peasants he had been living among and was writing about in the trilogy *Into Their Labours*. Except, of course, the knowledge and methods were not so distinct after all. Writing the fictional lives of Lucie Cabrol or Boris – in *Pig Earth* (1979) and *Once in Europa* (1987), the first two volumes of the trilogy – or about Paul Strand's photograph of Mr Bennett (p. 46), both required the kind of attentiveness celebrated by D. H. Lawrence in his poem 'Thought':

> Thought is gazing on to the face of life, and reading what can be
>   read,

Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to a
conclusion.
Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges,
Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending.[5]

In Berger's case, the habit of thought is like a sustained and disciplined version of something that had come instinctively to him as a boy. In *Here is Where We Meet* the author's mother remembers him as a child on a tram in Croydon: 'I never saw anyone look as hard as you did, sitting on the edge of the seat.'[6] If the boy ended up becoming a 'theorist', then it is by adherence to the method described by Goethe, quoted by Benjamin (in 'A Small History') and re-quoted by Berger in 'The Suit and the Photograph': 'There is a delicate form of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory' (p. 36).[7]

This is what makes Berger such a wonderful practical critic and reader of individual photographs ('gazing on to the face of life, and reading what can be read'), questioning them with his signature intensity of attention – and, often, tenderness. (See, for example, the analysis of Kertész's picture 'A Red Hussar Leaving, June 1919, Budapest', p. 74.) To that extent his writing on photography continues the interrogation of the visible that characterized his writing on painting. As he explains at the beginning of the conversation with Sebastião Salgado: 'I try to put into words what I see' (p. 169).

In 1960 Berger had defined his aesthetic criteria simply and confidently: 'does this work help or encourage men to know and claim their social rights?'[8] Consistent with this, his writing on photography was from the start – from the essay on Che Guevara of 1967, 'Image of Imperialism' – avowedly and unavoidably political. (Which meant, in 'Photographs of Agony', of 1972, he could argue that pictures of war and famine which *seemed* political often served to remove the suffering depicted from the political decisions that brought it about into an unchangeable and apparently permanent realm of the human condition.) Naturally, he has gravitated towards political, documentary or 'campaigning' photographers, but the range is wide and the notion of political never reducible to what the Indian photographer Raghubir Singh called 'the abject as subject'.[9] In 'The Suit and the Photograph' Sander's image of three peasants going to a dance becomes the starting point for the history of the suit as an idealization of 'purely *sedentary* power' (p. 41) and an illustration of Gramsci's notion of hegemony. (As with Benjamin's 'Work of Art', remember that this was the 1970s, almost twenty years before Gore Vidal informed Michael Foot that 'the young, even in America, are reading Gramsci'.[10]) Lee Friedlander, the least theory-driven of photographers, once commented on how much stuff – how much unintended information – accidentally ended up in his pictures. 'It's a generous medium, photography,' he concluded drily.[11] 'The Suit and the Photograph' is an object lesson in how much information is there to be discovered and revealed even in photographs lacking the visual density of Friedlander's. It's also exemplary, reminding us that many of the best essays are also journeys, epistemological journeys that take us beyond the moment depicted, often beyond photography – and sometimes back again. In 'Between Here and Then', written for an exhibition by Marc Trivier in 2005, Berger mentions the photographs only briefly before telling a story about an old and beloved clock, how the sound of its ticking makes the kitchen where he lives breathe. The clock breaks (is actually broken by the author in what must have been a furious moment of temporal slapstick), Berger takes it to a mender only to find . . . Well, that would spoil the story but, at the end, as well as a literal return there is also a coming together, a tacit exchange of greetings between Berger and Barthes, who wrote, in one of the most beautiful passages of *Camera Lucida*:

> For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches – and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood.[12]

This is a glimpse of Barthes the novelist in exquisite miniature. Berger's critical writing, meanwhile, has gone hand in hand with the creation of a substantial body of fiction. As Berger examines and coaxes out a photograph's stories – both the ones it reveals and those that lie concealed – so the task of the critic and interrogator of images gives way to the vocation and embrace of the storyteller. And it does not stop there, since, as he reminds us in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, 'the traffic between storytelling and metaphysics is continuous'.[13]

The essays in this book are arranged more or less chronologically. They comprise selections from books by Berger and previously uncollected pieces written for exhibitions or as introductions and afterwords to catalogues. A few very minor mistakes have been silently corrected and some other very small changes have been made to eliminate discrepancies resulting from the pieces having gone through the different wash cycles of previous house styles. All of the pieces would benefit from being more comprehensively illustrated. This is more of a problem, obviously, than it was when a given piece appeared in a book filled with large, high-quality reproductions. It is less of a problem now than it was back in the time of Sontag's *On Photography* since so many of the pictures can be found instantly online, can even be viewed on the same device on which this book may be read. Having said that, it bears repeating that *Another Way of Telling* was conceived as a collaboration. The images are as important as the words. In the essays included here ('Appearances' and

'Stories'), we have only Berger's words which, in this context, serve as signposts, directing you back to the book, where they can be reunited with Mohr's pictures.

Geoff Dyer
Iowa City, August 2012

Notes

1 John Berger, *New Society*, 26 February 1976, p. 445.
2 John Berger, *Selected Essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 559.
3 Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 359.
4 Alfred Stieglitz, *Photographs and Writings*, ed. Sarah Greenough (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art/Bulfinch Press, 1999), p. 13.
5 D. H. Lawrence, *Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 673.
6 John Berger, *Here is Where We Meet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 8.
7 For a different translation of the passage on p. 36, see Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 252.
8 John Berger, *Selected Essays*, p. 7.
9 Raghubir Singh, *River of Colour* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 12.
10 Gore Vidal, *The Last Empire* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 304.
11 Peter Galassi, *Friedlander* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 14.
12 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) p. 15.
13 John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 30.

Understanding a Photograph

Image of Imperialism

On Tuesday 10 October 1967, a photograph was transmitted to the world to prove that Guevara had been killed the previous Sunday in a clash between two companies of the Bolivian army and a guerrilla force on the north side of the Rio Grande River near a jungle village called Higueras. (Later this village received the proclaimed reward for the capture of Guevara.) The photograph of the corpse was taken in a stable in the small town of Vallegrande. The body was placed on a stretcher and the stretcher was placed on top of a cement trough.

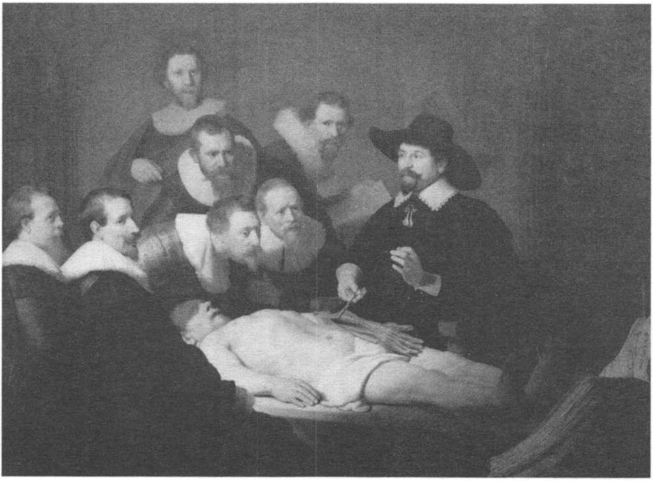
During the preceding two years 'Che' Guevara had become legendary. Nobody knew for certain where he was. There was no incontestable evidence of anyone having seen him. But his presence was constantly assumed and invoked. At the head of his last statement – sent from a guerrilla base 'somewhere in the world' to the Tricontinental Solidarity Organization in Havana – he quoted a line from the nineteenth-century revolutionary poet José Martí: 'Now is the time of the furnaces, and only light should be seen.' It was as though in his own declared light Guevara had become invisible and ubiquitous.

Now he is dead. The chances of his survival were in inverse ratio to the force of the legend. The legend had to be nailed. 'If,' said *The New York Times*, 'Ernesto Che Guevara was really killed in Bolivia, as now seems probable, a myth as well as a man has been laid to rest.'

We do not know the circumstances of his death. One can gain some idea of the mentality of those into whose hands he fell by their treatment of his body after his death. First they hid it. Then they displayed it. Then they buried it in an anonymous grave in an unknown place. Then they disinterred it. Then they burnt it. But before burning it, they cut off the fingers for later identification. This might suggest that they had serious doubts whether it was really Guevara whom they had killed. Equally it can suggest that they had no doubts but feared the corpse. I tend to believe the latter.

The purpose of the photograph of 10 October was to put an end to a legend. Yet on many who saw it its effect may have been very different. What is its meaning? What, precisely and unmysteriously, does this photograph mean now? I can but cautiously analyse it as regards myself.

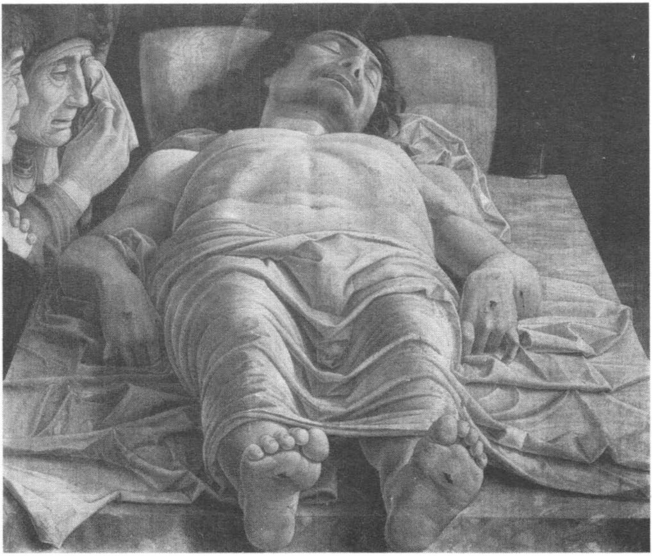
There is a resemblance between the photograph and Rembrandt's painting of *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*. The immaculately dressed Bolivian colonel with a handkerchief to his nose has



taken the doctor's place. The two figures on his right stare at the cadaver with the same intense but impersonal interest as the two nearest doctors to the left of Doctor Tulp. It is true that there are more figures in the Rembrandt – as there were certainly more men, unphotographed, in the stable at Vallegrande. But the placing of the corpse in relation to the figures above it, and in the corpse the sense of global stillness – these are very similar.

Nor should this be surprising, for the function of the two pictures is similar: both are concerned with showing a corpse being formally and objectively examined. More than that, both are concerned with *making an example of the dead*: one for the advancement of medicine, the other as a political warning. Thousands of photographs are taken of the dead and the massacred. But the occasions are seldom formal ones of demonstration. Doctor Tulp is demonstrating the ligaments of the arm, and what he says applies to the normal arm of every man. The colonel with the handkerchief is demonstrating the final fate – as decreed by 'divine providence' – of a notorious guerrilla leader, and what he says is meant to apply to every guerrillero on the continent.

I was also reminded of another image: Mantegna's painting of the dead Christ, now in the Brera at Milan. The body is seen from the same height, but from the feet instead of from the side. The hands are in identical positions, the fingers curving in the same gesture. The drapery over the lower part of the body is creased and formed in the same manner as the blood-sodden, unbuttoned, olive-green trousers on Guevara. The head is raised at the same angle. The mouth is slack of expression in the same way. Christ's eyes have been shut, for there are two mourners beside him. Guevara's eyes are open, for there are no mourners: only the colonel with the handkerchief, a US intelligence agent, a number of Bolivian soldiers and the journalists. Once again, the similarity need not surprise. There are not so many ways of laying out the criminal dead.



Yet this time the similarity was more than gestural or functional. The emotions with which I came upon that photograph on the front page of the evening paper were very close to what, with the help of historical imagination, I had previously assumed the reaction of a contemporary believer might have been to Mantegna's painting. The power of a photograph is comparatively short-lived. When I look at the photograph now, I can only reconstruct my first incoherent emotions. Guevara was no Christ. If I see the Mantegna again in Milan, I shall see in it the body of Guevara. But this is only because in certain rare cases the tragedy of a man's death completes and exemplifies the meaning of his whole life. I am acutely aware of that about Guevara, and certain painters were once aware of it about Christ. That is the degree of emotional correspondence.

The mistake of many commentators on Guevara's death has been to suppose that he represented only military skill or a certain revolutionary strategy. Thus they talk of a setback or a defeat. I am in no position to assess the loss which Guevara's death may mean to the revolutionary movement of South America. But it is certain that Guevara represented and will represent more than the details of his plans. He represented a decision, a conclusion.

Guevara found the condition of the world as it is intolerable. It had only recently become so. Previously, the conditions under which two-thirds of the people of the world lived were approximately the same as now. The degree of exploitation and enslavement was as great. The suffering involved was as intense and as widespread. The waste was as colossal. But it was not intolerable because the full measure of the truth about these conditions was unknown – even by those who suffered it. Truths are not constantly evident in the circumstances to which they refer. They are born – sometimes late. This truth was born with the struggles and wars of national liberation. In the light of the newborn truth, the significance of imperialism changed. Its demands were seen to be different. Previously it had demanded cheap raw materials, exploited labour and a controlled world market. Today it demands a mankind that counts for nothing.

Guevara envisaged his own death in the revolutionary fight against this imperialism.

> Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this, our battle-cry, may have reached some receptive ear and another hand may be extended to wield our weapons and other men be ready to intone the funeral dirge with the staccato chant of the machine-gun and new battle-cries of war and victory.[1]

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[1] 'Vietnam Must Not Stand Alone', *New Left Review*, London, no. 43, 1967.

His envisaged death offered him the measure of how intolerable his life would be if he accepted the intolerable condition of the world as it is. His envisaged death offered him the measure of the necessity of changing the world. It was by the licence granted by his envisaged death that he was able to live with the necessary pride that becomes a man.

At the news of Guevara's death, I heard someone say: 'He was the world symbol of the possibilities of one man.' Why is this true? Because he recognized what was intolerable for man and acted accordingly.

The measure by which Guevara had lived suddenly became a unit which filled the world and obliterated his life. His envisaged death became actual. The photograph is about this actuality. The possibilities have gone. Instead there is blood, the smell of formol, the untended wounds on the unwashed body, flies, the shambling trousers: the small private details of the body rendered in dying as public and impersonal and broken as a razed city.

Guevara died surrounded by his enemies. What they did to him while he was alive was probably consistent with what they did to him after he was dead. In his extremity he had nothing to support him but his own previous decisions. Thus the cycle was closed. It would be the vulgarest impertinence to claim any knowledge of his experience during that instant or that eternity. His lifeless body, as seen in the photograph, is the only report we have. But we are entitled to deduce the logic of what happens when the cycle closes. Truth flows in the obverse direction. His envisaged death is no more the measure of the necessity for changing the intolerable condition of the world. Aware now of his actual death, he finds in his life the measure of his justification, and the world-as-his-experience becomes tolerable to him.

The foreseeing of this final logic is part of what enables a man or a people to fight against overwhelming odds. It is part of the secret of the moral factor which counts as three to one against weapon power.

The photograph shows an instant: that instant at which Guevara's body, artificially preserved, has become a mere object of demonstration. In this lies its initial horror. But what is it intended to demonstrate? Such horror? No. It is to demonstrate, at the instant of horror, the identity of Guevara and, allegedly, the absurdity of revolution. Yet by virtue of this very purpose, the instant is transcended. The life of Guevara and the idea or fact of revolution immediately invoke processes which preceded that instant and which continue now. Hypothetically, the only way in which the purpose of those who arranged for and authorized the photograph could have been achieved would have been to preserve artificially at that instant the whole state of the world as it was: to stop life. Only in such a way could the content of Guevara's living example have been denied. As it is, either the photograph means nothing because the spectator has no inkling of what is involved, or else its meaning denies or qualifies its demonstration.

I have compared it with two paintings because paintings, before the invention of photography, are the only visual evidence we have of how people saw what they saw. But in its effect it is profoundly different from a painting. A painting, or a successful one at least, comes to terms with the processes invoked by its subject matter. It even suggests an attitude towards those processes. We can regard a painting as almost complete in itself.

In face of this photograph we must either dismiss it or complete its meaning for ourselves. It is an image which, as much as any mute image ever can, calls for decision.

October 1967

Prompted by another recent newspaper photograph, I continue to consider the death of 'Che' Guevara.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, for a man to envisage his death as the possibly direct consequence of his choice of a certain course of action is the measure of his *loyalty* as a servant. This is true whatever the social station or privilege of the man. Inserted between himself and his own meaning there is always a power to which his only possible relationship is one of service or servitude. The power may be considered abstractly as Fate. More usually it is personified in God, King or the Master.

Thus the choice which the man makes (the choice whose foreseen consequence may be his own death) is curiously incomplete. It is a choice submitted to a superior power for acknowledgement. The man himself can only judge *sub judice*: finally it is he who will be judged. In exchange for this limited responsibility he receives benefits. The benefits can range from a master's recognition of his courage to eternal bliss in heaven. But in all cases the ultimate decision and the ultimate benefit are located as exterior to his own self and life. Consequently death, which would seem to be so definitive an *end*, is for him a *means*, a treatment to which he submits for the sake of some aftermath. Death is like the eye of a needle through which he is threaded. Such is the mode of his heroism.

The French Revolution changed the nature of heroism. (Let it be clear that I do not refer to specific courages: the endurance of pain or torture, the will to attack under fire, the speed and lightness of movement and decision in battle, the spontaneity of mutual aid under danger – these courages must be largely defined by physical experience and have perhaps changed very little. I refer only to the choice which may precede these other courages.) The French Revolution brings the King to judgement and condemns him.

Saint-Just, aged twenty-five, in his first speech to the Convention argues that monarchy is crime, because the King usurps the sovereignty of the people.

> It is impossible to reign innocently: the madness of it is too clear. Every king is a rebel and a usurper.[2]

It is true that Saint-Just serves – in his own mind – the General Will of the people, but he has freely chosen to do so because he believes that the people, if allowed to be true to their own nature, embody Reason and that their Republic represents Virtue.

> In the world there are three kinds of infamy with which Republican virtue can reach no compromise: the first are kings: the second is the serving of kings: the third is the laying down of arms while there still exists anywhere a master and a slave.[3]

It is now less likely that a man envisages his own death as the measure of his loyalty as a servant to a master. His envisaged death is likely to be the measure of his love of Freedom: a proof of the principle of his own liberty.

Twenty months after his first speech Saint-Just spends the night preceding his own execution writing at his desk. He makes no active attempt to save himself. He has already written:

> Circumstances are only difficult for those who draw back from the grave . . . I despise the dust of which I am composed, the dust which is speaking to you: anyone can pursue and put an end to this dust. But I defy anybody to snatch from me what I have given myself, an independent life in the sky of the centuries.[4]

'What I have given myself'. The ultimate decision is now located within the self. But not categorically and entirely; there is a certain ambiguity. God no longer exists, but Rousseau's Supreme Being is there to confuse the issue by way of a metaphor. The metaphor allows one to believe that the self will share in the historical judgement of one's own life. 'An independent life in the sky' of historical judgement. There is still the ghost of a pre-existent order.

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[2] Saint-Just, *Discours et rapports* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1957), p. 66 (translation by the author).

[3] Ibid., p. 90.

[4] Ibid.

Even when Saint-Just is declaring the opposite – in his defiant last speech of defence for Robespierre and himself – the ambiguity remains:

> Fame is an empty noise. Let us put our ears to the centuries that have gone: we no longer hear anything; those who, at another time, shall walk among our urns, shall hear no more. The good – that is what we must pursue, whatever the price, preferring the title of a dead hero to that of a living coward.[5]

But in life, as opposed to the theatre, the dead hero never hears himself so called. The political stage of a revolution often has a theatrical, because exemplary, tendency. The world watches to learn.

> Tyrants everywhere looked upon us because we were judging one of theirs; today when, by a happier destiny, you are deliberating on the liberty of the world, the people of the earth who are the truly great of the earth will, in their turn, watch you.[6]

Yet, notwithstanding the truth of this, there is, philosophically, a sense in which Saint-Just dies triumphantly trapped within his 'stage' role. (To say this in no way detracts from his courage.)

Since the French Revolution, the bourgeois age. Among those few who envisage their own death (and not their own fortunes) as the direct consequence of their principled decisions, such marginal ambiguity disappears.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid. Saint-Just to the Convention, on the Constitution.

The confrontation between the living man and the world as he finds it becomes total. There is nothing exterior to it, not even a principle. A man's envisaged death is the measure of his refusal to accept what confronts him. There is nothing beyond that refusal.

The Russian anarchist Voinarovsky, who was killed throwing a bomb at Admiral Dubassov, wrote:

> Without a single muscle on my face twitching, without saying a word, I shall climb on the scaffold – and this will not be an act of violence perpetrated on myself, it will be the perfectly natural result of all that I have lived through.[7]

He envisages his own death on the scaffold – and a number of Russian terrorists at that time died exactly as he describes – as though it were the peaceful death of an old man. Why is he able to do this? Psychological explanations are not enough. It is because he finds the world of Russia, which is comprehensive enough to seem like the whole world, intolerable. Not intolerable to him personally, as a suicide finds the world, but intolerable *per se*. His foreseen death 'will be the perfectly natural result' of all that he has lived through in his attempt to change the world, because the foreseeing of anything less would have meant that he found the 'intolerable' tolerable.

In many ways the situation (but not the political theory) of the Russian anarchists at the turn of the century prefigures the contemporary situation. A small difference lies in 'the world of Russia' *seeming* like the whole world. There was, strictly speaking, an alternative beyond the borders of Russia. Thus, in order to destroy this alternative and make Russia a world unto itself, many of the anarchists were drawn towards a somewhat mystical patriotism.

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[7] Quoted in Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 140.

Today there is no alternative. The world is a single unit, and it has become intolerable.

Was it ever more tolerable? you may ask. Was there ever less suffering, less injustice, less exploitation? There can be no such audits. It is necessary to recognize that the intolerability of the world is, in a certain sense, an historical achievement. The world was not intolerable so long as God existed, so long as there was the ghost of a pre-existent order, so long as large tracts of the world were unknown, so long as one believed in the distinction between the spiritual and the material (it is there that many people still find their justification in finding the world tolerable), so long as one believed in the natural inequality of man.

The photograph shows a South Vietnamese peasant being interrogated by an American soldier. Shoved against her temple is the muzzle of a gun, and, behind it, a hand grasps her hair. The gun, pressed against her, puckers the prematurely old and loose skin of her face.

In wars there have always been massacres. Interrogation under threat or torture has been practised for centuries. Yet the meaning to be found – even via a photograph – in this woman's life (and by now her probable death) is new.

It will include every personal particular, visible or imaginable: the way her hair is parted, her bruised cheek, her slightly swollen lower lip, her name and all the different significations it has acquired according to who is addressing her, memories of her own childhood, the individual quality of her hatred of her interrogator, the gifts she was born with, every detail of the circumstances under which she has so far escaped death, the intonation she gives to the name of each person she loves, the diagnosis of whatever medical weakness she may have and their social and economic causes, everything that she opposes in her subtle mind to the muzzle of the gun jammed against her temple. But it will also include global truths: no violence has been so intense, so widespread or has continued for so long as that inflicted by the imperialist countries upon the majority of the world: the war in Vietnam is being waged to destroy the example of a united people who resisted this violence and proclaimed their independence: the fact that the Vietnamese are proving themselves invincible against the greatest imperialist power on earth is a proof of the extraordinary resources of a nation of 32 million: elsewhere in the world the resources (such resources include not only materials and labour but the possibilities of each life lived) of our 2,000 millions are being squandered and abused.

It is said that exploitation must end in the world. It is known that exploitation increases, extends, prospers and becomes ever more ruthless in defence of its right to exploit.

Let us be clear: it is not the war in Vietnam that is intolerable: Vietnam confirms the intolerability of the present condition of the world. This condition is such that the example of the Vietnamese people offers hope.

Guevara recognized this and acted accordingly. The world is not intolerable until the possibility of transforming it exists but is denied. The social forces historically capable of bringing about the transformation are – at least in general terms – defined. Guevara chose to identify himself with these forces. In doing so he was not submitting to so-called 'laws' of history but to the historical nature of his own existence.

His envisaged death is no longer the measure of a servant's loyalty, nor the inevitable end of an heroic tragedy. The eye of death's needle has been closed – there is nothing to thread through it, not even a future (unknown) historical judgement. Provided that he makes no transcendental appeal and provided that he acts out of the maximum possible consciousness of what is knowable to him, his envisaged death has become the measure of the parity which can now exist between the self and the world: it is the measure of his total commitment and his total independence.

It is reasonable to suppose that after a man such as Guevara has made his decision, there are moments when he is aware of this freedom which is qualitatively different from any freedom previously experienced.

This should be remembered as well as the pain, the sacrifice and the prodigious effort involved. In a letter to his parents when he left Cuba, Guevara wrote:

> Now a will-power that I have polished with an artist's attention will support my feeble legs and tired-out lungs. I will make it.[8]

January 1968

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[8] E. 'Che' Guevara, *Le Socialisme et l'homme* (Paris: Maspero, 1967), p. 113 (translation by the author).

Understanding a Photograph

For over a century, photographers and their apologists have argued that photography deserves to be considered a fine art. It is hard to know how far the apologetics have succeeded. Certainly the vast majority of people do not consider photography an art, even while they practise, enjoy, use and value it. The argument of apologists (and I myself have been among them) has been a little academic.

It now seems clear that photography deserves to be considered as though it were not a fine art. It looks as though photography (whatever kind of activity it may be) is going to outlive painting and sculpture as we have thought of them since the Renaissance. It now seems fortunate that few museums have had sufficient initiative to open photographic departments, for it means that few photographs have been preserved in sacred isolation, it means that the public have not come to think of any photographs as being *beyond* them. (Museums function like homes of the nobility to which the public at certain hours are admitted as visitors. The class nature of the 'nobility' may vary, but as soon as a work is placed in a museum it acquires the *mystery* of a way of life which excludes the mass.)

Let me be clear. Painting and sculpture as we know them are not dying of any stylistic disease, of anything diagnosed by the professionally horrified as cultural decadence; they are dying because, in the world as it is, no work of art can survive and not become a valuable property. And this implies the death of painting and sculpture because property, as once it was not, is now inevitably opposed to all other values. People believe in property, but in essence they only believe in the illusion of protection which property gives. All works of fine art, whatever their content, whatever the sensibility of an individual spectator, must now be reckoned as no more than props for the confidence of the world spirit of conservatism.

By their nature, photographs have little or no property value because they have no rarity value. The very principle of photography is that the resulting image is not unique, but on the contrary infinitely reproducible. Thus, in twentieth-century terms, photographs are records of things seen. Let us consider them no closer to works of art than cardiograms. We shall then be freer of illusions. Our mistake has been to categorize things as art by considering certain phases of the process of creation. But logically this can make all man-made objects art. It is more useful to categorize art by what has become its social function. It functions as property. Accordingly, photographs are mostly outside the category.

Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen. If everything that existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless. A photograph celebrates neither the event itself nor the faculty of sight in itself. A photograph is already a message about the event it records. The urgency of this message is not entirely dependent on the urgency of the event, but neither can it be entirely independent from it. At its simplest, the message, decoded, means: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording.*

This is equally true of very memorable photographs and the most banal snapshots. What distinguishes the one from the other is the degree to which the photograph explains the message, the degree to which the photograph makes the photographer's decision transparent and comprehensible. Thus we come to the little-understood paradox of the photograph. The photograph is an automatic record through the mediation of light of a given event: yet it uses the *given* event to *explain* its recording. Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious.

We must rid ourselves of a confusion brought about by continually comparing photography with the fine arts. Every handbook on photography talks about composition. The good photograph is the well-composed one. Yet this is true only in so far as we think of photographic images imitating painted ones. Painting is an art of arrangement: therefore it is reasonable to demand that there is some kind of order in what is arranged. Every relation between forms in a painting is to some degree adaptable to the painter's purpose. This is not the case with photography. (Unless we include those absurd studio works in which the photographer arranges every detail of his subject before he takes the picture.) Composition in the profound, formative sense of the word cannot enter into photography.

The formal arrangement of a photograph explains nothing. The events portrayed are in themselves mysterious or explicable according to the spectator's knowledge of them prior to his seeing the photograph. What then gives the photograph as photograph meaning? What makes its minimal message – *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording* – large and vibrant?

The true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time. One might argue that photography is as close to music as to painting. I have said that a photograph bears witness to a human choice being exercised. This choice is not between photographing X and Y: but between photographing at X moment or at Y moment. The objects recorded in any photograph (from the most effective to the most commonplace) carry approximately the same weight, the same conviction. What varies is the intensity with which we are made aware of the poles of absence and presence. Between these two poles photography finds its proper meaning. (The most popular use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent.)

A photograph, while recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum. The power of a painting depends upon its internal references. Its reference to the natural world beyond the limits of the painted surface is never direct; it deals in equivalents. Or, to put it another way: painting interprets the world, translating it into its own language. But photography has no language of its own. One learns to read photographs as one learns to read footprints or cardiograms. The language in which photography deals is the language of events. All its references are external to itself. Hence the continuum.

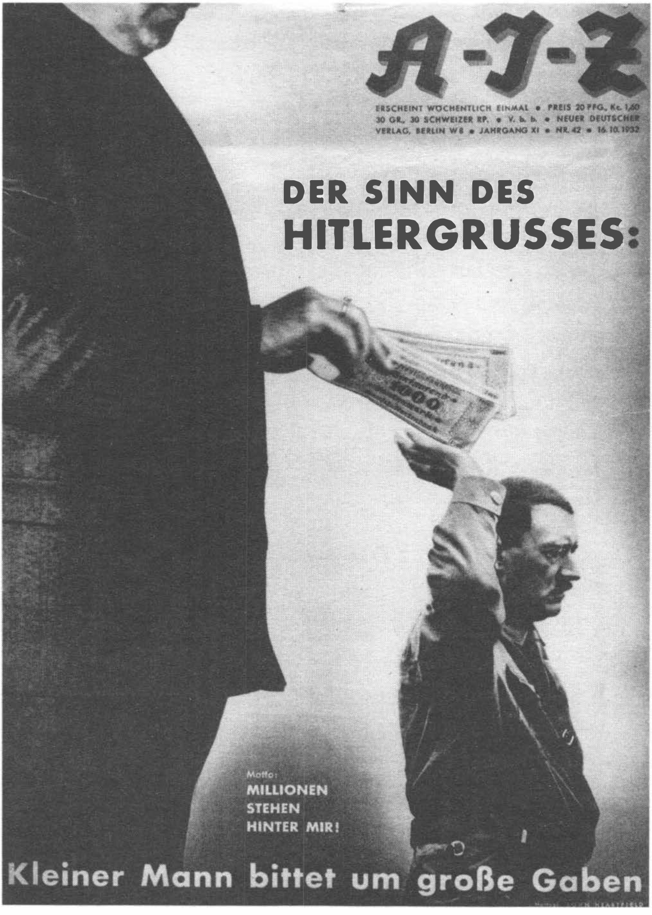
A movie director can manipulate time as a painter can manipulate the confluence of the events he depicts. Not so the still photographer. The only decision he can take is as regards the moment he chooses to isolate. Yet this apparent limitation gives the photograph its unique power. *What it shows invokes what is not shown.* One can look at any photograph to appreciate the truth of this. The immediate relation between what is present and what is absent is particular to each photograph: it may be that of ice to sun, of grief to a tragedy, of a smile to a pleasure, of a body to love, of a winning race-horse to the race it has run.

A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it. The nature of this quantum of truth, and the ways in which it can be discerned, vary greatly. It may be found in an expression, an action, a juxtaposition, a visual ambiguity, a configuration. Nor can this truth ever be independent of the spectator. For the man with a Polyfoto of his girl in his pocket, the quantum of truth in an 'impersonal' photograph must still depend upon the general categories already in the spectator's mind.

All this may seem close to the old principle of art transforming the particular into the universal. But photography does not deal in constructs. There is no transforming in photography. There is only decision, only focus. The minimal message of a photograph may be less simple than we first thought. Instead of it being: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording*, we may now decode it as: *The degree to which I believe this is worth looking at can be judged by all that I am willingly not showing because it is contained within it.*

Why complicate in this way an experience which we have many times every day – the experience of looking at a photograph? Because the simplicity with which we usually treat the experience is wasteful and confusing. We think of photographs as works of art, as evidence of a particular truth, as likenesses, as news items. Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality. Hence the crucial role of photography in ideological struggle. Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us.

October 1968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Kleiner Mann bittet um große Gaben
HEARTFIELD

Political Uses of Photo-Montage

John Heartfield, whose real name was Helmut Herzfelde, was born in Berlin in 1891. His father was an unsuccessful poet and anarchist. Threatened with prison for public sacrilege, the father fled from Germany and settled in Austria. Both parents died when Helmut was eight. He was brought up by the peasant mayor of the village on the outskirts of which the Herzfelde family had been living in a forest hut. He had no more than a primary education.

As a youth he got a job in a relative's bookshop and from there worked his way to art school in Munich, where he quickly came to the conclusion that the fine arts were an anachronism. He adopted the English name Heartfield in defiance of German wartime patriotism. In 1916 he started with his brother Wieland a dissenting left-wing magazine, and, with George Grosz, invented the technique of photo-montage. (Raoul Hausmann claims to have invented it elsewhere at the same time.) In 1918 Heartfield became a founder member of the German Communist Party. In 1920 he played a leading role in the Berlin Dada Fair. Until 1924 he worked in films and for the theatre. Thereafter he worked as a graphic propagandist for the German communist press and between about 1927 and 1937 became internationally famous for the wit and force of his photo-montage posters and cartoons.

He remained a communist, living after the war in East Berlin, until his death in 1968. During the second half of his life, none of his published work was in any way comparable in originality or passion to the best of his work done in the decade 1927–37. The latter offers a rare example outside the Soviet Union during the revolutionary years of an artist committing his imagination wholly to the service of a mass political struggle.

What are the qualities of this work? What conclusions may we draw from them? First, a general quality.

There is a Heartfield cartoon of Streicher standing on a pavement beside the inert body of a beaten-up Jew. The caption reads: 'A Pan-German'. Streicher stands in his Nazi uniform, hands behind his back, eyes looking straight ahead, with an expression that neither denies nor affirms what has happened at his feet. It is literally and metaphorically beneath his notice. On his jacket are a few slight traces of dirt or blood. They are scarcely enough to incriminate him – in different circumstances they would seem insignificant. All that they do is slightly to soil his tunic.

In Heartfield's best critical works there is a sense of everything having been soiled – even though it is not possible, as it is in the Streicher cartoon, to explain exactly why or how. The greyness, the very tonality of the photographic print suggest it, as do the folds of the grey clothes, the outlines of the frozen gestures, the half-shadows on the pale faces, the textures of the street walls, of the medical overalls, of the black silk hats. Apart from what they depict, the images themselves are sordid: or, more precisely, they express disgust at their own sordidness.

One finds a comparable physical disgust suggested in nearly all modern political cartoons which have survived their immediate purpose. It does not require a Nazi Germany to provoke such disgust. One sees this quality at its clearest and simplest in the great political portrait caricatures of Daumier. It represents the deepest universal reaction to the stuff of modern politics. And we should understand why.

It is disgust at that particular kind of sordidness which exudes from those who now wield individual political power. This sordidness is not a confirmation of the abstract moral belief that all power corrupts. It is a specific historical and political phenomenon. It could not occur in a theocracy or a secure feudal society. It must await the principle of modern democracy and then the cynical manipulating of that principle. It is endemic in, but by no means exclusive to, latter-day bourgeois politics and advanced capitalism. It is nurtured from the gulf between the aims a politician claims and the actions he has in fact already decided upon.

It is not born of personal deception or hypocrisy as such. Rather, it is born of the manipulator's assurance, of his own indifference to the flagrant contradiction which he himself displays between words and actions, between noble sentiments and routine practice. It resides in his complacent trust in the hidden undemocratic power of the state. Before each public appearance he knows that his words are only for those whom they can persuade, and that with those whom they do not there are other ways of dealing. Note this sordidness when watching the next party political broadcast.

What is the particular quality of Heartfield's best work? It stems from the originality and aptness of his use of photo-montage. In Heartfield's hands the technique becomes a subtle but vivid means of political education, and more precisely of Marxist education.

With his scissors he cuts out events and objects from the scenes to which they originally belonged. He then arranges them in a new, unexpected, discontinuous scene to make a political point – for example, parliament is being placed in a wooden coffin. But this much might be achieved by a drawing or even a verbal slogan. The peculiar advantage of photo-montage lies in the fact that everything which has been cut out keeps its familiar photographic appearance. We are still looking first at *things* and only afterwards at symbols.

But because these things have been shifted, because the natural continuities within which they normally exist have been broken, and because they have now been arranged to transmit an unexpected message, we are made conscious of the arbitrariness of their continuous normal message. Their ideological covering or disguise, which fits them so well when they are in their proper place that it becomes indistinguishable from their appearances, is abruptly revealed for what it is. Appearances themselves are suddenly showing us how they deceive us.

Two simple examples. (There are many more complex ones.) A photograph of Hitler returning the Nazi salute at a mass meeting (which we do not see). Behind him, and much larger than he is, the faceless figure of a man. This man is discreetly passing a wad of banknotes into Hitler's open hand raised above his head. The message of the cartoon (October 1932) is that Hitler is being supported and financed by the big industrialists. But, more subtly, Hitler's charismatic gesture is being divested of its accepted current meaning.

A cartoon of one month later. Two broken skeletons lying in a crater of mud on the Western Front, photographed from above. Everything has disintegrated except for the nailed boots which are still on their feet, and, although muddy, are in wearable condition. The caption reads: 'And again?' Underneath there is a dialogue between the two dead soldiers about how other men are already lining up to take their place. What is being visually contested here is the power and virility normally accorded by Germans to the sight of jackboots.

Those interested in the future didactic use of photo-montage for social and political comment should, I am sure, experiment further with this ability of the technique to *demystify things.* Heartfield's genius lay in his discovery of this possibility.

Photo-montage is at its weakest when it is purely symbolic, when it uses its own means to further rhetorical mystification. Heartfield's work is not always free from this. The weakness reflects deep political contradictions.

For several years before 1933, communist policy towards the

Nazis on the one hand and the German social democrats on the other was both confused and arbitrary. In 1928, after the fall of Bukharin and under Stalin's pressure, the Comintern decided to designate all social democrats as 'social fascists' – there is a Heartfield cartoon of 1931 in which he shows an SPD leader with the face of a snarling tiger. As a result of this arbitrary scheme of simplified moral clairvoyance being imposed from Moscow on local contradictory facts, any chance of the German communists influencing or collaborating with the nine million SPD voters who were mostly workers and potential anti-Nazis was forfeited. It is possible that with a different strategy the German working class might have prevented the rise of Hitler.

Heartfield accepted the party line, apparently without any misgivings. But among his works there is a clear distinction between those which demystify and those which exhort with simplified moral rhetoric. Those which demystify treat of the rise of Nazism in Germany – a social-historical phenomenon with which Heartfield was tragically and intimately familiar; those which exhort are concerned with global generalizations which he inherited ready-made from elsewhere.

Again, two examples. A cartoon of 1935 shows a minuscule Goebbels standing on a copy of *Mein Kampf*, putting out his hand in a gesture of dismissal. 'Away with these degenerate subhumans,' he says – a quotation from a speech he made at Nuremberg. Towering above him as giants, making his gesture pathetically absurd, is a line of impassive Red Army soldiers with rifles at the ready. The effect of such a cartoon on all but loyal communists could only have been to confirm the Nazi lie that the USSR represented a threat to Germany. In ideological contrasts, as distinct from reality, there is only a paper-thin division between thesis and antithesis; a single reflex can turn black into white.

A poster for the First of May 1937 celebrating the Popular Front in France. An arm holding a red flag and sprigs of cherry blossom;

a vague background of clouds (?), sea waves (?), mountains (?). A caption from the *Marseillaise*: 'Liberté, liberté chérie, combats avec tes défenseurs!' Everything about this poster is as symbolic as it is soon to be demonstrated politically false.

I doubt whether we are in a position to make moral judgements about Heartfield's integrity. We would need to know and to feel the pressures, both from within and without, under which he worked during that decade of increasing menace and terrible betrayals. But, thanks to his example, and that of other artists such as Mayakovsky or Tatlin, there is one issue which we should be able to see more clearly than was possible earlier.

It concerns the principal type of moral leverage applied to committed artists and propagandists in order to persuade them to suppress or distort their own original imaginative impulses. I am not speaking now of intimidation but of moral and political argument. Often such arguments were advanced by the artist himself against his own imagination.

The moral leverage was gained through asking questions concerning utility and effectiveness. Am I being useful enough? Is my work effective enough? These questions were closely connected with the belief that a work of art or a work of propaganda (the distinction is of little importance here) was a *weapon* of political struggle. Works of imagination can exert great political and social influence. Politically revolutionary artists hope to integrate their work into a mass struggle. But the influence of their work cannot be determined, either by the artist or by a political commissar, in advance. And it is here that we can see that to compare a work of imagination with a weapon is to resort to a dangerous and far-fetched metaphor.

The effectiveness of a weapon can be estimated quantitatively. Its performance is isolable and repeatable. One chooses a weapon for a situation. The effectiveness of a work of imagination cannot be estimated quantitatively. Its performance is not isolable or repeatable. It changes with circumstances. It creates its own situation. There is no *foreseeable* quantitative correlation between the quality of a work of imagination and its effectiveness. And this is part of its nature because it is intended to operate within a field of subjective interactions which are interminable and immeasurable. This is not to grant to art an ineffable value; it is only to emphasize that the imagination, when true to its impulse, is continually and inevitably questioning the existing category of usefulness. It is ahead of that part of the social self which asks the question. It must deny itself in order to answer the question in its own terms. By way of this denial revolutionary artists have been persuaded to compromise, and to do so in vain – as I have indicated in the case of John Heartfield.

It is lies that can be qualified as useful or useless; the lie is surrounded by what has not been said and its usefulness or not can be gauged according to what has been hidden. The truth is always first discovered in open space.

October 1969

Photographs of Agony

The news from Vietnam did not make big headlines in the papers this morning. It was simply reported that the American air force is systematically pursuing its policy of bombing the north. Yesterday there were 270 raids.

Behind this report there is an accumulation of other information. The day before yesterday the American air force launched the heaviest raids of this month. So far more bombs have been dropped this month than during any other comparable period. Among the bombs being dropped are the seven-ton superbombs, each of which flattens an area of approximately 8,000 square metres. Along with the large bombs, various kinds of small antipersonnel bombs are being dropped. One kind is full of plastic barbs which, having ripped through the flesh and embedded themselves in the body, cannot be located by X-ray. Another is called the Spider: a small bomb like a grenade with almost invisible 30-centimetre-long antennae, which, if touched, act as detonators. These bombs, distributed over the ground where larger explosions have taken place, are designed to blow up survivors who run to put out the fires already burning, or go to help those already wounded.

There are no pictures from Vietnam in the papers today. But there is a photograph taken by Donald McCullin in Hue in 1968 which could have been printed with the reports this morning.[9] It shows an old man squatting with a child in his arms; both of them are bleeding profusely with the black blood of black-and-white photographs.

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[9] See Donald McCullin, *The Destruction Business* (London: Open Gate Books, 1972).

In the last year or so, it has become normal for certain mass-circulation newspapers to publish war photographs which earlier would have been suppressed as being too shocking. One might explain this development by arguing that these newspapers have come to realize that a large section of their readers are now aware of the horrors of war and want to be shown the truth. Alternatively, one might argue that these newspapers believe that their readers have become inured to violent images and so now compete in terms of ever more violent sensationalism.

The first argument is too idealistic and the second too transparently cynical. Newspapers now carry violent war photographs because their effect, except in rare cases, is not what it was once presumed to be. A paper like the *Sunday Times* continues to publish shocking photographs about Vietnam or about Northern Ireland while politically supporting the policies responsible for the violence. This is why we have to ask: what effect do such photographs have?

Many people would argue that such photographs remind us shockingly of the reality, the lived reality, behind the abstractions of political theory, casualty statistics or news bulletins. Such photographs, they might go on to say, are printed on the black curtain which is drawn across what we choose to forget or refuse to know. According to them, McCullin serves as an eye we cannot shut. Yet what is it that they make us see?

They bring us up short. The most literal adjective that could be applied to them is *arresting*. We are seized by them. (I am aware that there are people who pass them over, but about them there is nothing to say.) As we look at them, the moment of the other's suffering engulfs us. We are filled with either despair or indignation. Despair takes on some of the other's suffering to no purpose.

Indignation demands action. We try to emerge from the moment of the photograph back into our lives. As we do so, the contrast is such that the resumption of our lives appears to be a hopelessly inadequate response to what we have just seen.

McCullin's most typical photographs record sudden moments of agony – a terror, a wounding, a death, a cry of grief. These moments are in reality utterly discontinuous with normal time. It is the knowledge that such moments are probable and the anticipation of them that makes 'time' in the front line unlike all other experiences of time. The camera which isolates a moment of agony isolates no more violently than the experience of that moment isolates itself. The word *trigger*, applied to rifle and camera, reflects a correspondence which does not stop at the purely mechanical. The image seized by the camera is doubly violent and both violences reinforce the same contrast: the contrast between the photographed moment and all others.

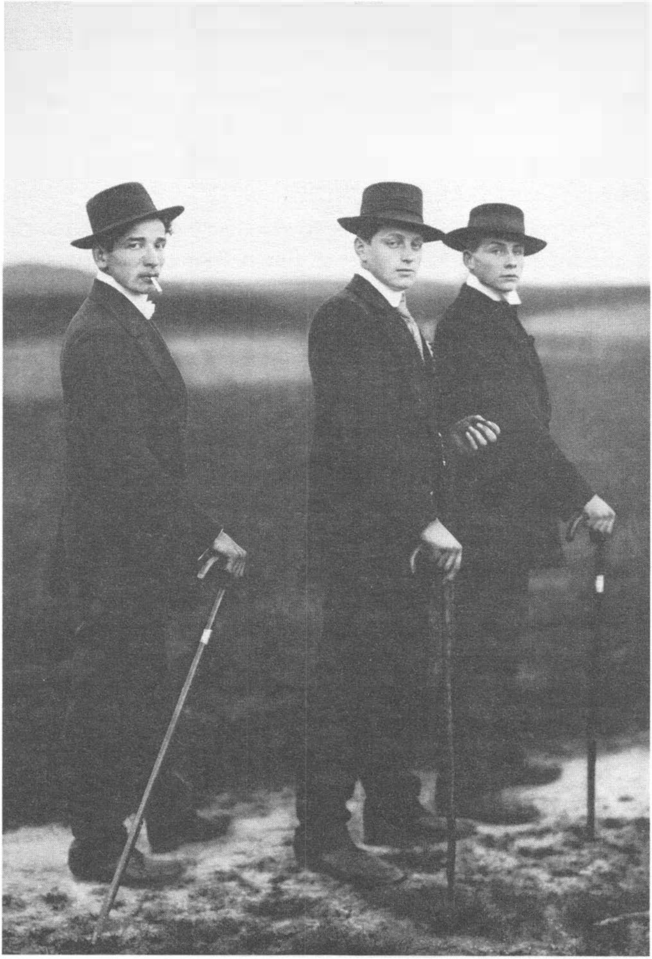
As we emerge from the photographed moment back into our lives, we do not realize this; we assume that the discontinuity is our responsibility. The truth is that any response to that photographed moment is bound to be felt as inadequate. Those who are there in the situation being photographed, those who hold the hand of the dying or staunch a wound, are not seeing the moment as we have and their responses are of an altogether different order. It is not possible for anyone to look pensively at such a moment and to emerge stronger. McCullin, whose 'contemplation' is both dangerous and active, writes bitterly underneath a photograph: 'I only use the camera like I use a toothbrush. It does the job.'

The possible contradictions of the war photograph now become apparent. It is generally assumed that its purpose is to awaken concern. The most extreme examples – as in most of McCullin's work – show moments of agony in order to extort the maximum concern. Such moments, whether photographed or not, are discontinuous with all other moments. They exist by themselves. But the reader who has been arrested by the photograph may tend to feel this discontinuity as his own personal moral inadequacy. *And as soon as this happens even his sense of shock is dispersed*: his own moral inadequacy may now shock him as much as the crimes being committed in the war. Either he shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing a kind of penance – of which the purest example would be to make a contribution to OXFAM or to UNICEF.

In both cases, the issue of the war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticized. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody.

Confrontation with a photographed moment of agony can mask a far more extensive and urgent confrontation. Usually the wars which we are shown are being fought directly or indirectly in 'our' name. What we are shown horrifies us. The next step should be for us to confront our own lack of political freedom. In the political systems as they exist, we have no legal opportunity of effectively influencing the conduct of wars waged in our name. To realize this and to act accordingly is the only effective way of responding to what the photograph shows. Yet the double violence of the photographed moment actually works against this realization. That is why they can be published with impunity.

July 1972



The Suit and the Photograph

What did August Sander (1876–1964) tell his sitters before he took their pictures? And how did he say it so that they all believed him in the same way?

They each look at the camera with the same expression in their eyes. In so far as there are differences, these are the results of the sitter's experience and character – the priest has lived a different life from the paper-hanger; but to all of them Sander's camera represents the same thing.

Did he simply say that their photographs were going to be a recorded part of history? And did he refer to history in such a way that their vanity and shyness dropped away, so that they looked into the lens telling themselves, using a strange historical tense: *I looked like this.* We cannot know. We simply have to recognize the uniqueness of his work, which he planned with the overall title of 'People of the Twentieth Century'.

His full aim was to find, in the area around Cologne, archetypes to represent every possible type, social class, sub-class, job, vocation, privilege. He hoped to take, in all, 600 portraits. His project was cut short by Hitler's Third Reich.

His son Erich, a socialist and anti-Nazi, was sent to jail for his beliefs, where he died. The father hid his archives in the countryside. What remains today is an extraordinary social and human document. No other photographer, taking portraits of his own countrymen, has ever been so translucently documentary.

Walter Benjamin wrote in 1931 about Sander's work:

> It was not as a scholar, advised by race theorists or social researchers, that the author [Sander] undertook his enormous task, but, in the publisher's words, 'as the result of immediate observation'. It is indeed unprejudiced observation, bold and at the same time delicate, very much in the spirit of Goethe's remark: 'There is a delicate form of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory.' Accordingly it is quite proper that an observer like Döblin should light upon precisely the scientific aspects of this opus and point out: 'Just as there is a comparative anatomy which enables one to understand the nature and history of organs, so here the photographer has produced a comparative photography, thereby gaining a scientific standpoint which places him beyond the photographer of detail.' It would be lamentable if economic circumstances prevented the further publication of this extraordinary corpus . . . Sander's work is more than a picture book, it is an atlas of instruction.

In the inquiring spirit of Benjamin's remarks I want to examine Sander's well-known photograph of three young peasants on the road in the evening, going to a dance. There is as much descriptive information in this image as in pages by a descriptive master like Zola. Yet I only want to consider one thing: their suits.

The date is 1914. The three young men belong, at the very most, to the second generation who ever wore such suits in the European countryside. Twenty or thirty years earlier, such clothes did not exist at a price which peasants could afford. Among the young today, formal dark suits have become rare in the villages of at least Western Europe. But for most of this century most peasants – and most workers – wore dark three-piece suits on ceremonial occasions, Sundays and fêtes.

When I go to a funeral in the village where I live, the men of my age and older are still wearing them. Of course there have been modifications of fashion: the width of trousers and lapels, the length of jackets change. Yet the physical character of the suit and its message does not change.

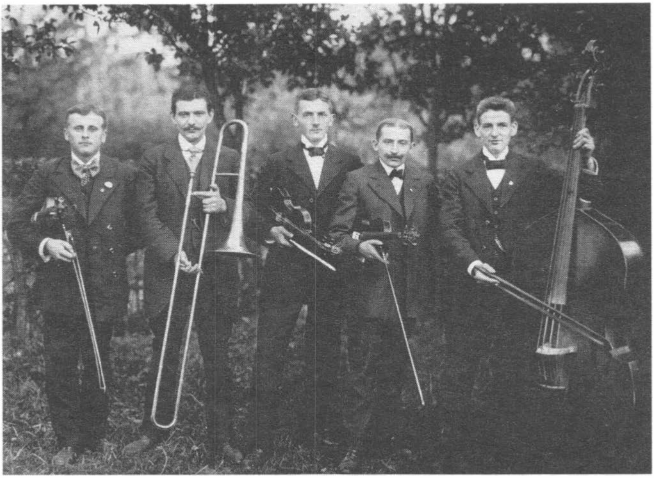
Let us first consider its physical character. Or, more precisely, its physical character when worn by village peasants. And to make generalization more convincing, let us look at a second photograph of a village band (see p. 38).

Sander took this group portrait in 1913, yet it could well have been the band at the dance for which the three with their walking sticks are setting out along the road. Now make an experiment. Block out the faces of the band with a piece of paper, and consider only their clothed bodies.

By no stretch of the imagination can you believe that these bodies belong to the middle or ruling class. They might belong to workers, rather than peasants; but otherwise there is no doubt. Nor is the clue their hands – as it would be if you could touch them. Then why is their class so apparent?

Is it a question of fashion and the quality of the cloth of their suits? In real life such details would be telling. In a small black-and-white photograph they are not very evident. Yet the static photograph shows, perhaps more vividly than in life, the fundamental reason why the suits, far from disguising the social class of those who wore them, underlined and emphasized it.

Their suits deform them. Wearing them, they look as though they were physically misshapen. A past style in clothes often looks absurd until it is reincorporated into fashion. Indeed the economic logic of fashion depends on making the old-fashioned look absurd. But here we are not faced primarily with that kind of absurdity; here the clothes look less absurd, less 'abnormal' than the men's bodies which are in them.



The musicians give the impression of being uncoordinated, bandy-legged, barrel-chested, low-arsed, twisted or scalene. The violinist on the right is made to look almost like a dwarf. None of their abnormalities is extreme. They do not provoke pity. They are just sufficient to undermine physical dignity. We look at bodies which appear coarse, clumsy, brute-like. And incorrigibly so.

Now make the experiment the other way round. Cover the bodies of the band and look only at their faces. They are country faces. Nobody could suppose that they are a group of barristers or managing directors. They are five men from a village who like to make music and do so with a certain self-respect. As we look at the faces we can imagine what the bodies would look like. And what we imagine is quite different from what we have just seen. In imagination we see them as their parents might remember them when absent. We accord them the normal dignity they have.

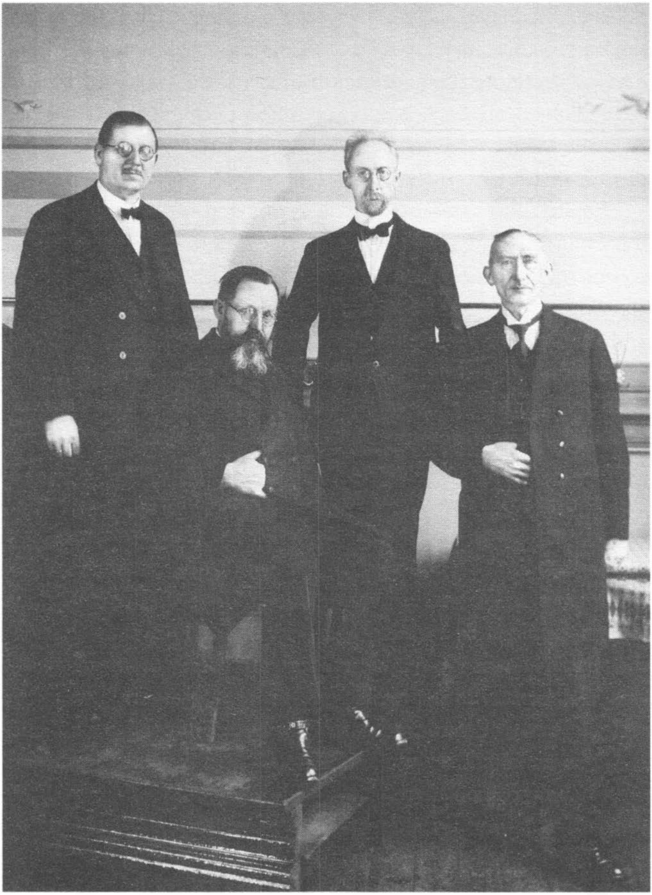
To make the point clearer, let us now consider an image where tailored clothes, instead of deforming, *preserve* the physical identity and therefore the natural authority of those wearing them. I have deliberately chosen a Sander photograph which looks old-fashioned and could easily lend itself to parody: the photograph of four Protestant missionaries in 1931 (see p. 40).

Despite the portentousness, it is not even necessary to make the experiment of blocking out the faces. It is clear that here the suits actually confirm and enhance the physical presence of those wearing them. The clothes convey the same message as the faces and as the history of the bodies they hide. Suits, experience, social formation and function coincide.

Look back now at the three on the road to the dance. Their hands look too big, their bodies too thin, their legs too short. (They use their walking sticks as though they were driving cattle.) We can make the same experiment with the faces and the effect is exactly the same as with the band. They can wear only their hats as if they suited them.

Where does this lead us? Simply to the conclusion that peasants can't buy good suits and don't know how to wear them? No, what is at issue here is a graphic, if small, example (perhaps one of the most graphic which exists) of what Gramsci called class hegemony. Let us look at the contradictions involved more closely.

Most peasants, if not suffering from malnutrition, are physically strong and well developed. Well developed because of the very varied hard physical work they do. It would be too simple to make a list of physical characteristics – broad hands through working with them from a very early age, broad shoulders relative to the body through the habit of carrying and so on. In fact many variations and exceptions also exist. One can, however, speak of a characteristic physical rhythm which most peasants, both women and men, acquire.



This rhythm is directly related to the energy demanded by the amount of work which has to be done in a day, and is reflected in typical physical movements and stance. It is an extended sweeping rhythm. Not necessarily slow. The traditional acts of scything or sawing may exemplify it. The way peasants ride horses makes it distinctive, as also the way they walk, as if testing the earth with each stride. In addition peasants possess a special physical dignity: this is determined by a kind of functionalism, a way of being *fully at home in effort.*

The suit, as we know it today, developed in Europe as a professional ruling-class costume in the last third of the nineteenth century. Almost anonymous as a uniform, it was the first ruling-class costume to idealize purely *sedentary* power. The power of the administrator and conference table. Essentially the suit was made for the gestures of talking and calculating abstractly. (As distinct, compared to previous upper-class costumes, from the gestures of riding, hunting, dancing, duelling.)

It was the English *gentleman*, with all the apparent restraint which that new stereotype implied, who launched the suit. It was a costume which inhibited vigorous action, and which action ruffled, uncreased and spoilt. 'Horses sweat, men perspire and women glow.' By the turn of the century, and increasingly after the First World War, the suit was mass-produced for mass urban and rural markets.

The physical contradiction is obvious. Bodies which are fully at home in effort, bodies which are used to extended sweeping movement: clothes idealizing the sedentary, the discrete, the effortless. I would be the last to argue for a return to traditional peasant costumes. Any such return is bound to be escapist, for these costumes were a form of capital handed down through generations, and in the world today, in which every corner is dominated by the market, such a principle is anachronistic.

We can note, however, how traditional peasant working or ceremonial clothes respected the specific character of the bodies they were clothing. They were in general loose, and only tight in places where they were gathered to allow for freer movement.

They were the antithesis of tailored clothes, clothes cut to follow the idealized shape of a more or less stationary body and then to hang from it!

Yet nobody forced peasants to buy suits, and the three on their way to the dance are clearly proud of them. They wear them with a kind of panache. This is exactly why the suit might become a classic and easily taught example of class hegemony.

Villagers – and, in a different way, city workers – were persuaded to choose suits. By publicity. By pictures. By the new mass media. By salesmen. By example. By the sight of new kinds of travellers. And also by political developments of accommodation and state central organization. For example: in 1900, on the occasion of the great Universal Exhibition, all the mayors of France were, for the first time ever, invited to a banquet in Paris. Most of them were the peasant mayors of village communes. Nearly thirty thousand came! And, naturally, for the occasion the vast majority wore suits.

The working classes – but peasants were simpler and more naïve about it than workers – came to accept as *their own* certain standards of the class that ruled over them – in this case standards of the chic and sartorial worthiness. At the same time their very acceptance of these standards, their very conforming to these norms which had nothing to do with either their own inheritance or their daily experience, condemned them, within the system of those standards, to being always, and recognizably to the classes above them, second-rate, clumsy, uncouth, defensive. That indeed is to succumb to a cultural hegemony.

Perhaps one can nevertheless propose that when the three arrived and had drunk a beer or two, and had eyed the girls (whose clothes had not yet changed so drastically), they hung up their jackets, took off their ties and danced, maybe wearing their hats, until the morning and the next day's work.

March 1979

Paul Strand

There is a widespread assumption that if one is interested in the visual, one's interest must be limited to a technique of somehow *treating* the visual. Thus the visual is divided into categories of special interest: painting, photography, real appearances, dreams and so on. And what is forgotten – like all essential questions in a positivist culture – is the meaning and enigma of visibility itself.

I think of this now because I want to describe what I can see in two books which are in front of me. They are two volumes of a retrospective monograph on the work of Paul Strand. The first photographs date from 1915, when Strand was a sort of pupil of Alfred Stieglitz; the most recent ones were taken in 1968.

The earliest works deal mostly with people and sites in New York. The first of them shows a half-blind beggar woman. One of her eyes is opaque, the other sharp and wary. Round her neck she wears a label with BLIND printed on it. It is an image with a clear social message. But it is something else, too. We shall see later that in all Strand's best photographs of people, he presents us with the visible evidence, not just of their presence, but of their *life*. At one level, such evidence of a life is social comment – Strand has consistently taken a left political position – but, at a different level, such evidence serves to suggest visually the totality of another lived life, from within which we ourselves are no more than a sight. This is why the black letters B-L-I-N-D on a white label do more than spell the word. While the picture remains in front of us, we can never take them as read. The earliest image in the book forces us to reflect on the significance of seeing itself.

The next section of photographs, from the 1920s, includes photographs of machine parts and close-ups of various natural forms – roots, rocks and grasses. Already Strand's technical perfectionism and strong aesthetic interests are apparent. But equally his obstinate, resolute respect for the thing-in-itself is also apparent. And the result is often disconcerting. Some would say that these photographs fail, for they remain details of what they have been taken from: they never become independent images. Nature, in these photographs, is intransigent to art, and the machine-details mock the stillness of their perfectly rendered images.

From the 1930s onwards, the photographs fall typically into groups associated with journeys that Strand made: to Mexico, New England, France, Italy, the Hebrides, Egypt, Ghana, Rumania. These are the photographs for which Strand has become well known, and it is on the evidence of these photographs that he should be considered a great photographer. With these black-and-white photographs, with these records which are distributable anywhere, he offers us the sight of a number of places and people in such a way that our view of the world can be qualitatively extended.

The social approach of Strand's photography to reality might be called documentary or neo-realist in so far as its obvious cinematic equivalent is to be found in the pre-war films of Flaherty or the immediate postwar Italian films of de Sica or Rossellini. This means that on his travels Strand avoids the picturesque, the panoramic, and tries to find a city in a street, the way of life of a nation in the corner of a kitchen. In one or two pictures of power dams and some 'heroic' portraits he gives way to the romanticism of Soviet socialist realism. But mostly his approach lets him choose ordinary subjects which in their ordinariness are extraordinarily representative.

He has an infallible eye for the quintessential: whether it is to be found on a Mexican doorstep, or in the way that an Italian village schoolgirl in a black pinafore holds her straw hat. Such photographs enter so deeply into the particular that they reveal to us the stream of a culture or a history which is flowing through that particular subject like blood. The images of these photographs, once seen, subsist in our mind until some actual incident, which we witness or live, refers to one of them as though to a more solid reality. But it is not this which makes Strand as a photographer unique.

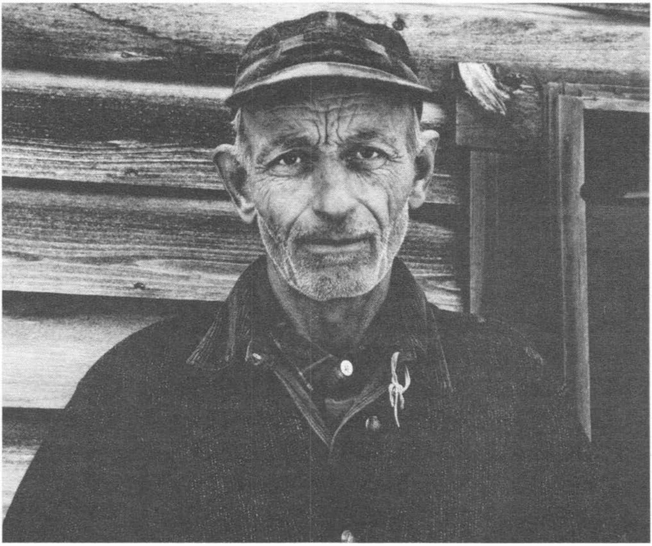
His method as a photographer is more unusual. One could say that it was the antithesis to Henri Cartier-Bresson's. The photographic moment for Cartier-Bresson is an instant, a fraction of a second, and he stalks that instant as though it were a wild animal. The photographic moment for Strand is a biographical or historic moment, whose duration is ideally measured not by seconds but by its relation to a lifetime. Strand does not pursue an instant, but encourages a moment to arise as one might encourage a story to be told.

In practical terms this means that he decides what he wants before he takes the picture, never plays with the accidental, works slowly, hardly ever crops a picture, often still uses a plate camera, formally asks people to pose for him. His pictures are all remarkable for their intentionality. His portraits are very frontal. The subject is looking at us; we are looking at the subject; it has been arranged like that. But there is a similar sense of frontality in many of his other pictures of landscapes or objects or buildings. His camera is not free-roving. He chooses where to place it.

Where he has chosen to place it is not where something is about to happen, but where a number of happenings will be related. Thus, without any use of anecdote, he turns his subjects into narrators. The river narrates itself. The field where the horses are grazing recounts itself. The wife tells the story of her marriage. In each case Strand, the photographer, has chosen the place to put his camera as listener.

The approach: neo-realist. The method: deliberate, frontal, formal, with every surface thoroughly scanned. What is the result?

His best photographs are unusually dense – not in the sense of being over-burdened or obscure, but in the sense of being filled with an unusual amount of substance per square inch. And all this substance becomes the stuff of the life of the subject. Take the famous portrait of Mr Bennett from Vermont, New England. His jacket, his shirt, the stubble on his chin, the timber of the house behind, the air around him become in this image the face of his life, of which his actual facial expression is the concentrated spirit. It is the whole photograph, frowning, which surveys us.



A Mexican woman sits against a wall. She has a woollen shawl over her head and shoulders and a broken plaited basket on her lap. Her skirt is patched and the wall behind her very shabby. The only fresh surface in the picture is that of her face. Once again, the surfaces we read with our eyes become the actual chafing texture of her daily life; once again the photograph is a panel of her being. At first sight the image is soberly materialist, but just as her body wears through her clothes and the load in the basket wears away the basket, and passers-by have rubbed off the surface of the wall, so her being as a woman (her own existence for herself) begins, as one goes on looking at the picture, to rub through the materialism of the image.

A young Rumanian peasant and his wife lean against a wooden fence. Above and behind them, diffused in the light, is a field and, above that, a small modern house, totally insignificant as architecture, and the grey silhouette of a nondescript tree beside it. Here it is not the substantiality of surfaces which fills every square inch but a Slav sense of distance, a sense of plains or hills that continue indefinitely. And, once more, it is impossible to separate this quality from the presence of the two figures; it is there in the angle of his hat, the long extended movement of his arms, the flowers embroidered on her waistcoat, the way her hair is tied up; it is there across the width of their wide faces and mouths. What informs the whole photograph – space – is part of the skin of their lives.

These photographs depend upon Strand's technical skill, his ability to select, his knowledge of the places he visits, his eye, his sense of timing, his use of the camera; but he might have all these talents and still not be capable of producing such pictures. What has finally determined his success in his photographs of people and in his landscapes – which are only extensions of people who happen to be invisible – is his ability to invite the narrative: to present himself to his subject in such a way that the subject is willing to say: *I am as you see me.*

This is more complicated than it may seem. The present tense of the verb *to be* refers only to the present; but nevertheless, with the first-person singular in front of it, it absorbs the past which is inseparable from the pronoun. *I am* includes all that has made me so. It is more than a statement of immediate fact: it is already an explanation, a justification, a demand – it is already autobiographical. Strand's photographs suggest his sitters trust him to *see* their life story. And it is for this reason that, although the portraits are formal and posed, there is no need, either on the part of photographer or photograph, for the disguise of a borrowed role.

Photography, because it preserves the appearance of an event or a person, has always been closely associated with the idea of the historical. The ideal of photography, aesthetics apart, is to seize an 'historic' moment. But Paul Strand's relation as a photographer to the historic is a unique one. His photographs convey a unique sense of duration. The *I am* is given its time in which to reflect on the past and to anticipate its future: the exposure time does no violence to the time of the *I am*: on the contrary, one has the strange impression that the exposure time *is* the lifetime.

March 1972

Uses of Photography

For Susan Sontag

I want to write down some of my responses to Susan Sontag's book *On Photography*. All the quotations I will use are from her text. The thoughts are sometimes my own, but all originate in the experience of reading her book.

The camera was invented by Fox Talbot in 1839. Within a mere thirty years of its invention as a gadget for an elite, photography was being used for police filing, war reporting, military reconnaissance, pornography, encyclopedic documentation, family albums, postcards, anthropological records (often, as with the Indians in the United States, accompanied by genocide), sentimental moralizing, inquisitive probing (the wrongly named 'candid camera'), aesthetic effects, news reporting and formal portraiture. The first cheap popular camera was put on the market, a little later, in 1888. The speed with which the possible uses of photography were seized upon is surely an indication of photography's profound, central applicability to industrial capitalism. Marx came of age the year of the camera's invention.

It was not, however, until the twentieth century and the period between the two world wars that the photograph became the dominant and most 'natural' way of referring to appearances. It was then that it replaced the word as immediate testimony. It was the period when photography was thought of as being most transparent, offering direct access to the real: the period of the great witnessing masters of the medium like Paul Strand and Walker Evans. It was, in the capitalist countries, the freest moment of photography: it had been liberated from the limitations of fine art, and it had become a public medium which could be used democratically.

Yet the moment was brief. The very 'truthfulness' of the new medium encouraged its deliberate use as a means of propaganda. The Nazis were among the first to use systematic photographic propaganda.

> Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern. Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood.

In the first period of its existence photography offered a new technical opportunity; it was an implement. Now, instead of offering new choices, its usage and its 'reading' were becoming habitual, an unexamined part of modern perception itself. Many developments contributed to this transformation. The new film industry. The invention of the lightweight camera – so that the taking of a photograph ceased to be a ritual and became a 'reflex'. The discovery of photojournalism – whereby the text follows the pictures instead of vice versa. The emergence of advertising as a crucial economic force.

> Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, free-standing particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*. The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery.

The first mass-media magazine was started in the United States in 1936. At least two things were prophetic about the launching of *Life*, the prophecies to be fully realized in the postwar television age. The new picture magazine was financed not by its sales, but by the advertising it carried. A third of its images were devoted to publicity. The second prophecy lay in its title. This is ambiguous. It may mean that the pictures inside are about life. Yet it seems to promise more: that these pictures *are* life. The first photograph in the first number played on this ambiguity. It showed a newborn baby. The caption underneath read: 'Life begins . . . '

What served in place of the photograph, before the camera's invention? The expected answer is the engraving, the drawing, the painting. The more revealing answer might be: memory. What photographs do out there in space was previously done within reflection.

> Proust somewhat misconstrues what photographs are: not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement.

Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, *belongs* to its subject in the way that a photograph does.

> A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.

Human visual perception is a far more complex and selective process than that by which a film records. Nevertheless the camera lens and the eye both register images – because of their sensitivity to light – at great speed and in the face of an immediate event. What the camera does, however, and what the eye in itself can never do, is to *fix* the appearance of that event. It removes its appearance from the flow of appearances and it preserves it, not perhaps for ever but for as long as the film exists. The essential character of this preservation is not dependent upon the image being static; unedited film rushes preserve in essentially the same way. The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supersession of further appearances. It holds them unchanging. And before the invention of the camera nothing could do this, except, in the mind's eye, the faculty of memory.

I am not saying that memory is a kind of film. That is a banal simile. From the comparison film / memory we learn nothing about the latter. What we learn is how strange and unprecedented was the procedure of photography.

Yet, unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances – with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances – prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding functions.

> And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time.
> Only that which narrates can make us understand.

Photographs in themselves do not narrate. Photographs preserve instant appearances. Habit now protects us against the shock involved in such preservation. Compare the exposure time for a film with the life of the print made, and let us assume that the print only lasts ten years: the ratio for an average modern photograph would be approximately 20,000,000,000:1. Perhaps that can serve as a reminder of the violence of the fission whereby appearances are separated by the camera from their function.

We must now distinguish between two quite distinct uses of photography. There are photographs which belong to private experience and there are those which are used publicly. The private photograph – the portrait of a mother, a picture of a daughter, a group photo of one's own team – is appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it. (The violence of the removal is sometimes felt as incredulousness: 'Was that really Dad?') Nevertheless such a photograph remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed. A mechanical device, the camera has been used as an instrument to contribute to a living memory. The photograph is a memento from a life being lived.

The contemporary public photograph usually presents an event, a seized set of appearances, which has nothing to do with us, its readers, or with the original meaning of the event. It offers information, but information severed from all lived experience. If the public photograph contributes to a memory, it is to the memory of an unknowable and total stranger. The violence is expressed in that strangeness. It records an instant sight about which this stranger has shouted: Look!

Who is the stranger? One might answer: the photographer. Yet if one considers the entire use-system of photographed images, the answer of 'the photographer' is clearly inadequate. Nor can one reply: those who use the photographs. It is because the photographs carry no certain meaning in themselves, because they are like images in the memory of a total stranger, that they lend themselves to any use.

Daumier's famous cartoon of Nadar in his balloon suggests an answer. Nadar is travelling through the sky above Paris – the wind has blown off his hat – and he is photographing with his camera the city and its people below.

Has the camera replaced the eye of God? The decline of religion corresponds with the rise of the photograph. Has the culture of capitalism telescoped God into photography? The transformation would not be as surprising as it may at first seem.

The faculty of memory led men everywhere to ask whether, just as they themselves could preserve certain events from oblivion, there might not be other eyes noting and recording otherwise unwitnessed events. Such eyes they then accredited to their ancestors, to spirits, to gods or to their single deity. What was seen by this supernatural eye was inseparably linked with the principle of justice. It was possible to escape the justice of men, but not this higher justice from which nothing or little could be hidden.

Memory implies a certain act of redemption. What is remembered has been saved from nothingness. What is forgotten has been abandoned. If all events are seen, instantaneously, outside time, by a supernatural eye, the distinction between remembering and forgetting is transformed into an act of judgement, into the rendering of justice, whereby recognition is close to *being remembered*, and condemnation is close to *being forgotten*. Such a presentiment, extracted from man's long, painful experience of time, is to be found in varying forms in almost every culture and religion, and, very clearly, in Christianity.

At first, the secularization of the capitalist world during the nineteenth century elided the judgement of God into the judgement of History in the name of Progress. Democracy and Science became the agents of such a judgement. And for a brief moment, photography, as we have seen, was considered to be an aid to these agents. It is still to this historical moment that photography owes its ethical reputation as Truth.

During the second half of the twentieth century the judgement of history has been abandoned by all except the underprivileged and dispossessed. The industrialized, 'developed' world, terrified of the past, blind to the future, lives within an opportunism which has emptied the principle of justice of all credibility. Such opportunism turns everything – nature, history, suffering, other people, catastrophes, sport, sex, politics – into spectacle. And the implement used to do this – until the act becomes so habitual that the conditioned imagination may do it alone – is the camera.

> Our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera's interventions. The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing. This, in turn, makes it easy to feel that any event, once underway, and whatever its moral character, should be allowed to complete itself – so that something else can be brought into the world, the photograph.

The spectacle creates an eternal present of immediate expectation: memory ceases to be necessary or desirable. With the loss of memory the continuities of meaning and judgement are also lost to us. The camera relieves us of the burden of memory. It surveys us like God, and it surveys for us. Yet no other god has been so cynical, for the camera records in order to forget.

Susan Sontag locates this god very clearly in history. He is the god of monopoly capitalism.

> A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anaesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit the natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats. The camera's twin capacities, to subjectivize reality and to objectify it, ideally serve these needs and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images.

Her theory of the current use of photographs leads one to ask whether photography might serve a different function. Is there an alternative photographic practice? The question should not be answered naïvely. Today no alternative professional practice (if one thinks of the profession of photographer) is possible. The system can accommodate any photograph. Yet it may be possible to begin to use photographs according to a practice addressed to an alternative future. This future is a hope which we need now, if we are to maintain a struggle, a resistance, against the societies and culture of capitalism.

Photographs have often been used as a radical weapon in posters, newspapers, pamphlets and so on. I do not wish to belittle the value of such agitational publishing. Yet the current systematic public use of photography needs to be challenged, not simply by turning it round like a cannon and aiming it at different targets, but by changing its practice. How?

We need to return to the distinction I made between the private and public uses of photography. In the private use of photography, the context of the instant recorded is preserved so that the photograph lives in an ongoing continuity. (If you have a photograph of Peter on your wall, you are not likely to forget what Peter means to you.) The public photograph, by contrast, is torn from its context, and becomes a dead object which, exactly because it is dead, lends itself to any arbitrary use.

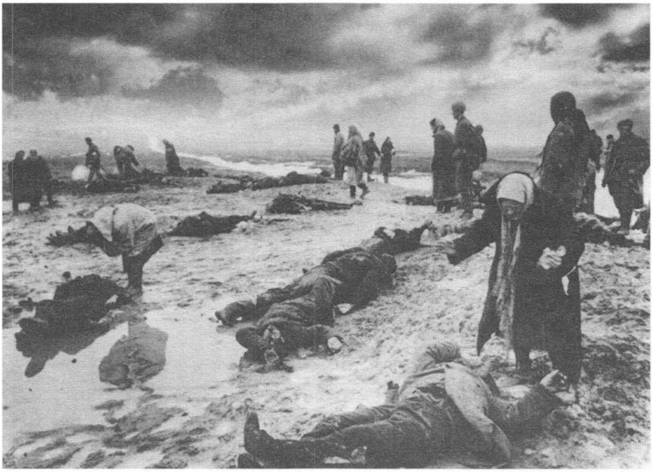
In the most famous photographic exhibition ever organized, *The Family of Man* (put together by Edward Steichen in 1955), photographs from all over the world were presented as though they formed a universal family album. Steichen's intuition was absolutely correct: the private use of photographs can be exemplary for their public use. Unfortunately the shortcut he took in treating the existing class-divided world as if it were a family inevitably made the whole exhibition, not necessarily each picture, sentimental and complacent. The truth is that most photographs taken of people are about suffering, and most of that suffering is man-made.

> One's first encounter [writes Susan Sontag] with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about.

Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would reacquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments. It is just possible that photography is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved. Such a memory would encompass any image of the past, however tragic, however guilty, within its own continuity. The distinction between the private and public uses of photography would be transcended. The Family of Man would exist.

Meanwhile we live today in the world as it is. Yet this possible prophecy of photography indicates the direction in which any alternative use of photography needs to develop. The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory.

The task will determine both the kinds of pictures taken and the way they are used. There can of course be no formulae, no prescribed practice. Yet in recognizing how photography has come to be used by capitalism, we can define at least some of the principles of an alternative practice.

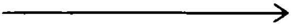


For the photographer this means thinking of her- or himself not so much as a reporter to the rest of the world but, rather, as a recorder for those involved in the events photographed. The distinction is crucial.

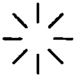
What makes photographs like these so tragic and extraordinary is that, looking at them, one is convinced that they were not taken to please generals, to boost the morale of a civilian public, to glorify heroic soldiers or to shock the world press: they were images addressed to those suffering what they depict. And given this integrity towards and with their subject matter, such photographs later became a memorial, to the 20 million Russians killed in the war, for those who mourn them. The unifying horror of a total people's war made such an attitude on the part of the war photographers (and even the censors) a natural one. Photographers, however, can work with a similar attitude in less extreme circumstances.

The alternative use of photographs which already exist leads us back once more to the phenomenon and faculty of memory.

The aim must be to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images. How? Normally photographs are used in a very unilinear way – they are used to illustrate an argument, or to demonstrate a thought which goes like this:



Very frequently also they are used tautologically so that the photograph merely repeats what is being said in words. Memory is not unilinear at all. Memory works radially, that is to say with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event. The diagram is like this:



If we want to put a photograph back into the context of experience, social experience, social memory, we have to respect the laws of memory. We have to situate the printed photograph so that it acquires something of the surprising conclusiveness of that which *was* and *is*.

What Brecht wrote about acting in one of his poems is applicable to such a practice. For *instant* one can read photography, for *acting* the recreating of context:

> So you should simply make the instant
> Stand out, without in the process hiding
> What you are making it stand out from. Give your acting
> That progression of one-thing-after-another, that attitude of
> Working up what you have taken on. In this way
> You will show the flow of events and also the course
> Of your work, permitting the spectator

To experience this Now on many levels, coming from Previously and
Merging into Afterwards, also having much else Now
Alongside it. He is sitting not only
In your theatre but also
In the world.

There are a few great photographs which practically achieve this by themselves. But any photograph may become such a 'Now' if an adequate context is created for it. In general the better the photograph, the fuller the context which can be created.

Such a context re-places the photograph in time – not its own original time for that is impossible – but in narrated time. Narrated time becomes historic time when it is assumed by social memory and social action. The constructed narrated time needs to respect the process of memory which it hopes to stimulate.

There is never a single approach to something remembered. The remembered is not like a terminus at the end of a line. Numerous approaches or stimuli converge upon it and lead to it. Words, comparisons, signs need to create a context for a printed photograph in a comparable way; that is to say, they must mark and leave open diverse approaches. A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic.

August 1978

Editor's note

Quotations from Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), in order of citation, are from pp. 3–4, 23, 165, 154, 23, 11, 178 and 19–20.

Appearances

The Ambiguity of the Photograph

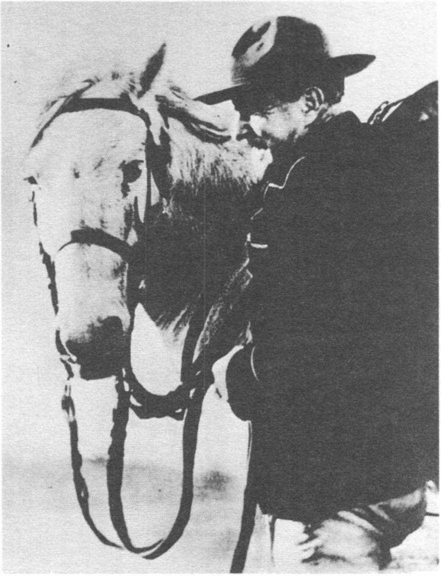
What makes photography a strange invention – with unforeseeable consequences – is that its primary raw materials are light and time.

Yet let us begin with something more tangible. A few days ago a friend of mine found this photograph and showed it to me.

I know nothing about it. The best way of dating it is probably by its photographic technique. Between 1900 and 1920? I do not know whether it was taken in Canada, the Alps, South Africa. All one can see is that it shows a smiling middle-aged man with his horse (see p. 62). Why was it taken? What meaning did it have for the photographer? Would it have had the same meaning for the man with the horse?

One can play a game of inventing meanings. The Last Mountie. (His smile becomes nostalgic.) The Man Who Set Fire to Farms. (His smile becomes sinister.) Before the Trek of Two Thousand Miles. (His smile becomes a little apprehensive.) After the Trek of Two Thousand Miles. (His smile becomes modest.) . . .

The most definite information this photograph gives is about the type of bridle the horse is wearing, and this is certainly not the reason why it was taken. Looking at the photograph alone it is even hard to know to what category it belonged. Was it a family-album picture, a newspaper picture, a traveller's snap?



Could it have been taken, not for the sake of the man, but of the horse? Was the man acting as a groom, just holding the horse? Was he a horse-dealer? Or was it a still photograph taken during the filming of one of the early Westerns?

The photograph offers irrefutable evidence that this man, this horse and this bridle existed. Yet it tells us nothing of the significance of their existence.

A photograph arrests the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed. All photographs are of the past, yet in them an instant of the past is arrested so that, unlike a lived past, it can never lead to the present. Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity.

Between the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph, there is an abyss. We are so used to photography that we no longer consciously register the second of these twin messages – except in special circumstances: when, for example, the person photographed was familiar to us and is now far away or dead. In such circumstances the photograph is more traumatic than most memories or mementos because it seems to confirm, prophetically, the later discontinuity created by the absence or death. Imagine for a moment that you were once in love with the man with the horse and that he has now disappeared.

If, however, he is a total stranger, one thinks only of the first message, which here is so ambiguous that the event escapes one. What the photograph shows goes with any story one chooses to invent.

Nevertheless the mystery of this photograph does not quite end there. No invented story, no explanation offered will be quite as *present* as the banal appearances preserved in this photograph. These appearances may tell us very little, but they are unquestionable.

The first photographs were thought of as marvels because, far more directly than any other form of visual image, they presented the appearance of what was absent. They preserved the look of things and they allowed the look of things to be carried away. The marvel in this was not only technical.

Our response to appearances is a very deep one, and it includes elements which are instinctive and atavistic. For example, appearances alone – regardless of all conscious considerations – can sexually arouse. For example, the stimulus to action – however tentative it remains – can be provoked by the colour red. More widely, the look of the world is the widest possible confirmation of the *thereness* of the world, and thus the look of the world continually proposes and confirms our relation to that thereness, which nourishes our sense of Being.

Before you tried to read the photograph of the man with the horse, before you placed it or named it, the simple act of looking at it confirmed, however briefly, your sense of being in the world, with its men, hats, horses, bridles . . .

The ambiguity of a photograph does not reside within the instant of the event photographed: there the photographic evidence is less ambiguous than any eye-witness account. The photo-finish of a race is rightly decided by what the camera has recorded. The ambiguity arises out of that discontinuity which gives rise to the second of the photograph's twin messages. (The abyss between the moment recorded and the moment of looking.)

A photograph preserves a moment of time and prevents it being effaced by the supersession of further moments. In this respect photographs might be compared to images stored in the memory. Yet there is a fundamental difference: whereas remembered images are the *residue* of continuous experience, a photograph isolates the appearances of a disconnected instant.

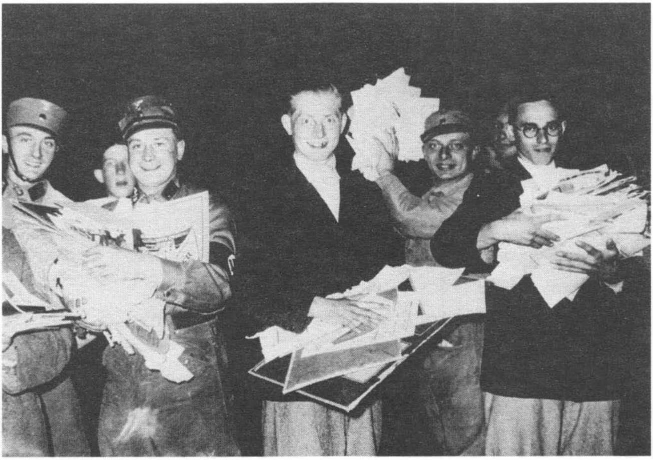
And in life, meaning is not instantaneous. Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development. Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning. Facts, information, do not in themselves constitute meaning. Facts can be fed into a computer and become factors in a calculation. No meaning, however, comes out of computers, for when we give meaning to an event, that meaning is a response, not only to the known, but also to the unknown: meaning and mystery are inseparable, and neither can exist without the passing of time. Certainty may be instantaneous; doubt requires duration; meaning is born of the two. An instant photographed can only acquire meaning in so far as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.

The professional photographer tries, when taking a photograph, to choose an instant which will persuade the public viewer to lend it an *appropriate* past and future. The photographer's intelligence or his empathy with the subject defines for him what is appropriate. Yet unlike the storyteller or painter or actor, the photographer only makes, in any one photograph, *a single constitutive choice*: the choice of the instant to be photographed. The photograph, compared with other means of communication, is therefore weak in intentionality.

A dramatic photograph may be as ambiguous as an undramatic one.

What is happening? It requires a caption for us to understand the significance of the event. 'Nazis Burning Books'. And the significance of the caption again depends upon a sense of history that we cannot necessarily take for granted.

All photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity. If the event is a public event, this continuity is history; if it is personal, the continuity, which has been broken, is a life story. Even a pure landscape breaks a continuity: that of the light and the weather. Discontinuity always produces



ambiguity. Yet often this ambiguity is not obvious, for as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion.

In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful; an open question appears to have been fully answered.

Yet it might be that the photographic ambiguity, if recognized and accepted as such, could offer to photography a unique means of expression. Could this ambiguity suggest another way of telling? This is a question I want to raise now and return to later.

Cameras are boxes for transporting appearances. The principle by which cameras work has not changed since their invention. Light, from the object photographed, passes through a hole and falls on to a photographic plate or film. The latter, because of its chemical preparation, preserves these traces of light. From these traces, through other slightly more complicated chemical processes, prints are made. Technically, by the standards of our century, it is a simple process. Just as the historically comparable invention of the printing press was, in its time, simple. What is still not so simple is to grasp the nature of the appearances which the camera transports.

Are the appearances which a camera transports a construction, a man-made cultural artefact, or are they, like a footprint in the sand, a trace *naturally* left by something that has passed? The answer is, both.

The photographer chooses the event he photographs. This choice can be thought of as a cultural construction. The space for this construction is, as it were, cleared by his rejection of what he did not choose to photograph. The construction is his reading of the event which is in front of his eyes. It is this reading, often intuitive and very fast, which decides his choice of the instant to be photographed.

Likewise, the photographed image of the event, when shown as a photograph, is also part of a cultural construction. It belongs to a specific social situation, the life of the photographer, an argument, an experiment, a way of explaining the world, a book, a newspaper, an exhibition.

Yet at the same time, the material relation between the image and what it represents (between the marks on the printing paper and the tree these marks represent) is an immediate and unconstructed one. And is indeed like a *trace*.

The photographer chooses the tree, the view of it he wants, the kind of film, the focus, the filter, the time exposure, the strength of the developing solution, the sort of paper to print on, the darkness or lightness of the print, the framing of the print – all this and more. But where he does not intervene – and cannot intervene without changing the fundamental character of photography – is between the light, emanating from that tree as it passes through the lens, and the imprint it makes on the film.

It may clarify what we mean by a *trace* if we ask how a drawing differs from a photograph. A drawing is a translation. That is to say each mark on the paper is consciously related, not only to the real or imagined 'model', but also to every mark and space already set out on the paper. Thus a drawn or painted image is woven together by the energy (or the lassitude, when the drawing is weak) of countless judgements. Every time a figuration is evoked in a drawing, everything about it has been mediated by consciousness, either intuitively or systematically. In a drawing an apple is *made* round and spherical; in a photograph, the roundness and the light and shade of the apple are received as a given.

This difference between making and receiving also implies a very different relation to time. A drawing contains the time of its own making, and this means that it possesses its own time, independent of the living time of what it portrays. The photograph, by contrast, receives almost instantaneously – usually today at a speed which cannot be perceived by the human eye. The only time contained in a photograph is the isolated instant of what it shows.

There is another important difference within the times contained by the two kinds of images. The time which exists within a drawing is not uniform. The artist gives more time to what she or he considers important. A face is likely to contain more time than the sky above it. Time in a drawing accrues according to human value. In a photograph time is uniform: every part of the image has been subjected to a chemical process of uniform duration. In the process of revelation all parts were equal.

These differences between a drawing and a photograph relating to time lead us to the most fundamental distinction between the two means of communication. The countless judgements and decisions which constitute a drawing are systematic. That is to say that they are grounded in an existent language. The teaching of this language and its specific usages at any given time are historically variable. A master-painter's apprentice during the Renaissance learnt a different practice and grammar of drawing from a Chinese apprentice during the Sung period. But every drawing, in order to recreate appearances, has recourse to a language.

Photography, unlike drawing, does not possess a language. The photographic image is produced instantaneously by the reflection of light; its figuration is *not* impregnated by experience or consciousness.

Barthes, writing about photography, talked of 'humanity encountering for the first time in its history *messages without a code*. Hence the photograph is not the last (improved) term of the great family of images; it corresponds to a decisive mutation of informational economies.'[10] The mutation being that photographs supply information without having a language of their own.

Photographs do not translate from appearances. They quote from them.

It is because photography has no language of its own, because it quotes rather than translates, that it is said that the camera cannot lie. It cannot lie because it prints directly.

(The fact that there were and are faked photographs is, paradoxically, a proof of this. You can only make a photograph tell an explicit lie by elaborate tampering, collage and re-photographing. You have in fact ceased to practise photography. Photography in itself has no language which can be *turned*.) And yet photographs can be, and are, massively used to deceive and misinform.

We are surrounded by photographic images which constitute a global system of misinformation: the system known as publicity, proliferating consumerist lies. The role of photography in this system is revealing. The lie is constructed before the camera. A 'tableau' of objects and figures is assembled. This 'tableau' uses a language of symbols (often inherited, as I have pointed out elsewhere,[11] from the iconography of oil painting), an implied narrative and, frequently, some kind of performance by models with a sexual content. This 'tableau' is then photographed. It is photographed precisely because the camera can bestow authenticity upon any set of appearances, however false. The camera does not lie even when it is used to quote a lie. And so, this makes the lie *appear* more truthful.

The photographic quotation is, within its limits, incontrovertible. Yet the quotation, placed like a fact in an explicit or implicit argument, can misinform. Sometimes the misinforming is deliberate, as in the case of publicity; often it is the result of an unquestioned ideological assumption.

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[10] Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 45.

[11] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 134, 141.

For example, all over the world during the nineteenth century, European travellers, soldiers, colonial administrators, adventurers, took photographs of 'the natives', their customs, their architecture, their richness, their poverty, their women's breasts, their headdresses; and these images, besides provoking amazement, were presented and read as proof of the justice of the imperial division of the world. The division between those who organized and rationalized and surveyed, and those who *were* surveyed.

In itself the photograph cannot lie, but, by the same token, it cannot tell the truth; or rather, the truth it does tell, the truth it can by itself defend, is a limited one.

The idealistic early press photographers – in the twenties and thirties of this century – believed that their mission was to bring home the truth to the world.

> Sometimes I come away from what I am photographing sick at heart, with the faces of people in pain etched as sharply in my mind as on my negatives. But I go back because I feel it is my place to make such pictures. Utter truth is essential, and that is what stirs me when I look through the camera.
>
> Margaret Bourke-White

I admire the work of Margaret Bourke-White. And photographers, under certain political circumstances, have indeed helped to alert public opinion to the truth of what was happening elsewhere. For example: the degree of rural poverty in the United States in the 1930s; the treatment of Jews in the streets of Nazi Germany; the effects of US napalm bombing in Vietnam. Yet to believe that what one sees, as one looks through a camera on to the experience of others, is the 'utter truth' risks confusing very different levels of the truth. And this confusion is endemic to the present public use of photographs.

Photographs are used for scientific investigation: in medicine, physics, meteorology, astronomy, biology. Photographic information is also fed into systems of social and political control – dossiers, passports, military intelligence. Other photographs are used in the media as a means of public communication. The three contexts are different, and yet it has been generally assumed that the truthfulness of the photograph – or the way that this truth functions – is the same in all three.

In fact, when a photograph is used scientifically, its unquestionable evidence is an aid in coming to a conclusion: it supplies information *within the conceptual framework* of an investigation. It supplies a missing detail. When photographs are used in a control system, their evidence is more or less limited to establishing identity and presence. But as soon as a photograph is used as a means of communication, the nature of lived experience is involved, and then the truth becomes more complex.

An X-ray photograph of a wounded leg can tell the 'utter truth' about whether the bones are fractured or not. But how does a photograph tell the 'utter truth' about a man's experience of hunger or, for that matter, his experience of a feast?

At one level there are no photographs which can be denied. All photographs have the status of fact. What has to be examined is in what way photography can and cannot give meaning to facts.

Let us recall how and when photography was born, how, as it were, it was christened, and how it grew up.

The camera was invented in 1839. Auguste Comte was just finishing his *Cours de philosophie positive.* Positivism and the camera and sociology grew up together. What sustained them all as practices was the belief that observable quantifiable facts, recorded by scientists and experts, would one day offer man such a total knowledge about nature and society that he would be able to order them both. Precision would replace metaphysics, planning would resolve social conflicts, truth would replace subjectivity, and all that was dark and hidden in the soul would be illuminated by empirical knowledge. Comte wrote that theoretically nothing need remain unknown to man except, perhaps, the origin of the stars! Since then cameras have photographed even the formation of stars! And photographers now supply us with more facts every month than the eighteenth-century Encylopedists dreamt of in their whole project.

Yet the positivist utopia was not achieved. And the world today is less controllable by experts, who have mastered what they believe to be its mechanisms, than it was in the nineteenth century.

What *was* achieved was unprecedented scientific and technical progress and, eventually, the subordination of all other values to those of a world market which treats everything, including people and their labour and their lives and their deaths, as a commodity. The unachieved positivist utopia became, instead, the global system of late capitalism wherein all that exists becomes quantifiable – not simply because it *can be* reduced to a statistical fact, but also because it *has been* reduced to a commodity.

In such a system there is no space for experience. Each person's experience remains an individual problem. Personal psychology replaces philosophy as an explanation of the world.

Nor is there space for the social function of subjectivity. All subjectivity is treated as private, and the only (false) form of it which is socially allowed is that of the individual consumer's dream.

From this primary suppression of the social function of subjectivity, other suppressions follow: of meaningful democracy (replaced by opinion polls and market-research techniques), of social conscience (replaced by self-interest), of history (replaced by racist and other myths), of hope – the most subjective and social of all energies (replaced by the sacralization of Progress as Comfort).

The way photography is used today both derives from and confirms the suppression of the social function of subjectivity. Photographs, it is said, tell the truth. From this simplification, which reduces the truth to the instantaneous, it follows that what a photograph tells about a door or a volcano belongs to the same order of truth as what it tells about a man weeping or a woman's body.

If no theoretical distinction has been made between the photograph as scientific evidence and the photograph as a means of communication, *this has been not so much an oversight as a proposal.*

The proposal was (and is) that when something is visible, it is a fact, and that facts contain the only truth.

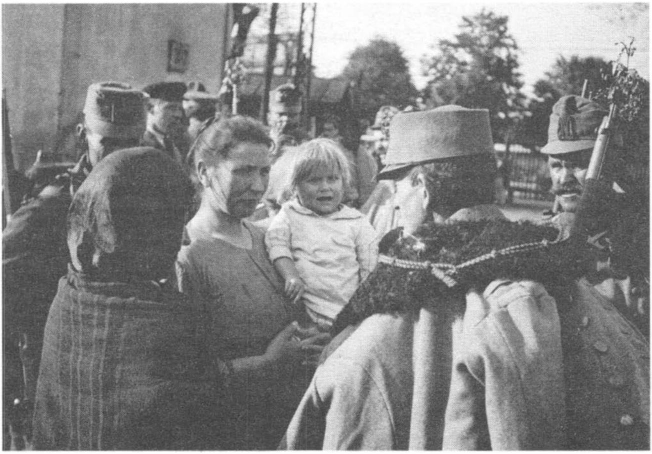
Public photography has remained the child of the hopes of positivism. Orphaned – because these hopes are now dead – it has been adopted by the opportunism of corporate capitalism. It seems likely that the denial of the innate ambiguity of the photograph is closely connected with the denial of the social function of subjectivity.

A Popular Use of Photography

> 'In our age there is no work of art that is looked at so closely as a photograph of oneself, one's closest relatives and friends, one's sweetheart,' wrote Lichtwark back in 1907, thereby moving the inquiry out of the realm of aesthetic distinctions into that of social functions. Only from this vantage point can it be carried further.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *A Small History of Photography* (1931)

A mother with her child is staring intently at a soldier. Perhaps they are speaking. We cannot hear their words. Perhaps they are saying nothing and everything is being said by the way they are looking at each other. Certainly a drama is being enacted between them.

The caption reads: 'A Red Hussar Leaving, June 1919, Budapest.' The photograph is by André Kertész.



So, the woman has just walked out of their home and will shortly go back alone with the child. The drama of the moment is expressed in the difference between the clothes they are wearing. His for travelling, for sleeping out, for fighting; hers for staying at home.

The caption can also entail other thoughts. The Hapsburg monarchy had fallen the previous autumn. The winter had been one of extreme shortages (especially of fuel in Budapest) and economic distintegration. Three months before, in March, the socialist Republic of Councils had been declared. The Western allies in Paris, fearful lest the Russian and now the Hungarian example of revolution should spread throughout Eastern Europe and the Balkans, were planning to dismantle the new republic. A blockade was already imposed. General Foch himself was planning the military invasion being carried out by Rumanian and Czech troops. On 8 June Clemenceau telegraphed an ultimatum to Béla Kun demanding a Hungarian military withdrawal which would have left the Rumanians occupying the eastern third of their country. For another six weeks the Hungarian Red Army fought on, but it was finally overwhelmed. By August, Budapest was occupied and very soon after, the first European fascist regime under Horthy was established.

If we are looking at an image from the past and we want to relate it to ourselves, we need to know something of the history of that past. And so the foregoing paragraph – and much more than that might be said – is relevant to the reading of Kertész's photograph. Which is presumably why he gave it the caption he did and not just the title 'Parting'. Yet the photograph – or rather, the way this photograph demands to be read – cannot be limited to the historical.

Everything in it is historical: the uniforms, the rifles, the corner by the Budapest railway station, the identity and biographies of all the people who are (or were) recognizable – even the size of the trees on the other side of the fence. And yet it also concerns a resistance to history: an opposition.

This opposition is not the consequence of the photographer having said: Stop! It is not that the resultant static image is like a fixed post in a flowing river. We know that in a moment the soldier will turn his back and leave; we presume that he is the father of the child in the woman's arms. The significance of the instant photographed is already claiming minutes, weeks, years.

The opposition exists in the parting look between the man and the woman. This look is not directed towards the viewer. We witness it as the older soldier with the moustache and the woman with the shawl (perhaps a sister) do. The exclusivity of this look is further emphasized by the boy in the mother's arms; he is watching his father, and yet he is excluded from their look.

This look, which crosses before our eyes, is holding in place what *is*, not specifically what is there around them outside the station, but what *is* their life, what *are* their lives. The woman and the soldier are looking at each other so that the image of what *is* now shall remain for them. In this look their being *is* opposed to their history, even if we assume that this history is one they accept or have chosen.

How can one be opposed to history? Conservatives may oppose with force changes in history. But there is another kind of opposition. Who can read Marx and not feel his hatred towards the historical processes he discovered and his impatience for the end of history when, he believed, the realm of necessity would be transformed into the realm of freedom?

An opposition to history may be partly an opposition to what happens in it. But not only that. Every revolutionary protest is also a protest against people being the objects of history. And as soon as people feel, as the result of their desperate protest, that they are no longer such objects, *history ceases to have the monopoly of time.*

> Imagine the blade of a giant guillotine as long as the diameter of the city. Imagine the blade descending and cutting a section through everything that is there – walls, railway lines, wagons, workshops, churches, crates of fruit, trees, sky, cobblestones. Such a blade has fallen a few yards in front of the face of everyone who is determined to fight. Each finds himself a few yards from the precipitous edge of an infinitely deep fissure which only he can see. The fissure, like a deep cut into the flesh, is unmistakably itself; there can be no doubting what has happened. But there is no pain at first.
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> The pain is the thought of one's own death probably being very near. It occurs to the men and women building the barricades that

> what they are handling, and what they are thinking, are probably being handled and thought by them for the last time. As they build the defences, the pain increases.
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> . . . At the barricades the pain is over. The transformation is complete. It is completed by a shout from the rooftops that the soldiers are advancing. Suddenly there is nothing to regret. The barricades are between their defenders and the violence done to them throughout their lives. There is nothing to regret because it is the quintessence of their past which is now advancing against them. On their side of the barricades it is already the future.[12]

Revolutionary actions are rare. Feelings of opposition to history, however, are constant, even if unarticulated. They often find their expression in what is called private life. A home has become not only a physical shelter but also a teleological shelter, however frail, against the remorselessness of history; a remorselessness which should be distinguished from the brutality, injustice and misery the same history often contains.

People's opposition to history is a reaction (even a protest, but a protest so intimate that it has no direct social expression and the indirect ones are often mystified and dangerous: both fascism and racism feed upon such protests) against a violence done to them. The violence consists in conflating time and history so that the two become indivisible, so that people can no longer read their experience of either of them separately.

This conflation began in Europe in the nineteenth century, and has become more complete and more extensive as the rate of historical change has increased and become global. All popular religious movements – such as the present mounting Islamic one against the materialism of the West – are a form of resistance to the violence of this conflation.

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[12] John Berger, G. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), pp. 71–2.

What does this violence consist in? The human imagination which grasps and unifies time (before imagination existed, each time scale – cosmic, geological, biological – was disparate) has always had the capacity of undoing time. This capacity is closely connected with the faculty of memory. Yet time is undone not only by being remembered but also by the living of certain moments which defy the passing of time, not so much by becoming unforgettable but because, within the experience of such moments there is an imperviousness to time. They are experiences which provoke the words *for ever, toujours, siempre, immer.* Moments of achievement, trance, dream, passion, crucial ethical decision, prowess, near-death, sacrifice, mourning, music, the visitation of *duende.* To name some of them.

Such moments have continually occurred in human experience. Although not frequent in any one lifetime, they are common. They are the material of *all* lyrical expression (from pop music to Heine and Sappho). Nobody has lived without experiencing such moments. Where people differ is in the confidence with which they credit importance to them. I say confidence since I believe that intimately, if not publicly, no one fails to allow them some importance. They are summit moments and they are intrinsic to the relation imagination/time.

Before time and history were conflated, the rate of historical change was slow enough for an individual's awareness of time passing to remain quite distinct from her or his awareness of historical change. The sequences of an individual life were surrounded by the relatively changeless, and the relatively changeless (history) was in its turn surrounded by the timeless.

History used to pay its respects to mortality: the enduring honoured the value of what was brief. Graves were a mark of such respect. Moments which defied time in the individual life were like glimpses through a window; these windows, let into the life, looked *across* history, which changed slowly, towards the timeless which would never change.

When in the eighteenth century the rate of historical change began to accelerate, causing the principle of historical progress to be born, the timeless or unchanging was claimed by and gradually incorporated into historical time. Astronomy arranged the stars historically. Renan historicized Christianity. Darwin made every origin historical. Meanwhile, actively, through imperialism and proletarianization, other cultures and ways of life and work, which embodied different traditions concerning time, were being destroyed. The factory which works all night is a sign of the victory of a ceaseless, uniform and remorseless time. The factory continues even during the time of dreams.

The principle of historical progress insisted that the elimination of all other views of history save its own was part of that progress. Superstition, embedded conservatism, so-called eternal laws, fatalism, social passivity, the fear of eternity so skilfully used by churches to intimidate, repetition and ignorance: all these had to be swept away and replaced by the proposal that man could make his own history. And indeed this did – and does – represent progress, in that social justice cannot be fully achieved without such an awareness of the historical possibility, and this awareness depends upon historical explanations being given.

Nevertheless a deep violence was done to subjective experience. And to argue that this is unimportant in comparison with the objective historical possibilities created is to miss the point because, precisely, the modern anguished form of the distinction subjective/objective begins and develops with this violence.

Today what surrounds the individual life can change more quickly than the brief sequences of that life itself. The timeless has been abolished, and history itself has become ephemerality. History no longer pays its respects to the dead: the dead are simply what it has passed through. (A study of the comparative number of public monuments erected during the last hundred years in the West would show a startling decline during the last twenty-five.) There is no longer any generally acknowledged value longer than that of a life, and most are shorter. The worldwide phenomenon of inflation is symptomatic in this respect: an unprecedented modern form of economic transience.

Consequently the common experience of those moments which defy time is now denied by everything which surrounds them. Such moments have ceased to be like windows looking across history towards the timeless. Experiences which prompt the term *for ever* have now to be assumed alone and privately. Their role has been changed: instead of transcending, they isolate. The period in which photography has developed corresponds to the period in which this uniquely modern anguish has become commonplace.

Yet fortunately people are never only the passive objects of history. And apart from popular heroism, there is also popular ingenuity. In this case such ingenuity uses whatever little there is at hand, to preserve experience, to recreate an area of 'timelessness', to insist upon the permanent. And so, hundreds of millions of photographs, fragile images, often carried next to the heart or placed by the side of the bed, are used to refer to that which historical time has no right to destroy.

The private photograph is treated and valued today as if it were the materialization of that glimpse through the window which looked across history towards that which was outside time.

The photograph of the woman and the Red Hussar represents an idea. The idea was not Kertész's. It was being lived in front of his eyes and he was receptive to it.

What did he see?

Summer sunlight.

The contrast between her dress and the heavy greatcoats of the soldiers who will have to sleep out.

The men waiting with a certain heaviness.

Her concentration – she looks at him as if already into the distance which will claim him.

Her scowl, which will not give way to weeping.

His modesty – one reads it by his ear and the way he holds his head because at this moment she is stronger than he.

Her acceptance, in the stance of her body.

The boy, surprised by the father's uniform, aware of the unusual occasion.

Her hair arranged before coming out, her worn dress.

The limits of their wardrobe.

It is only possible to itemize the things seen, for if they touch the heart, they do so essentially through the eye. For example, the appearance of the woman's hands clasped over her stomach tells how she might peel potatoes, how one of her hands might lie when asleep, how she would put up her hair.

The woman and the soldier are recognizing one another. How close a parting is to a meeting! And through that act of recognition, such as perhaps they have never experienced before, each hopes to take away an image of the other which will withstand anything that may happen. An image that nothing can efface. This is the idea being lived before Kertész's camera. And this is what makes this photograph paradigmatic. It shows a moment which is explicitly about what is implicit in all photographs that are not simply enjoyed but loved.

All photographs are possible contributions to history, and any photograph, under certain circumstances, can be used in order to break the monopoly which history today has over time.

The Enigma of Appearances

To read what has never been written.

Hofmannsthal

We have looked at two different uses of photography. An ideological use, which treats the positivist evidence of a photograph as if it represented the ultimate and only truth. And in contrast, a popular but private use, which cherishes a photograph to substantiate a subjective feeling.

I have not considered photography as an art. Paul Strand, who was a great photographer, thought of himself as an artist. In recent years art museums have begun to collect and show photographs. Man Ray said: 'I photograph what I do not wish to paint, and I paint what I cannot photograph.' Other equally serious photographers, like Bruce Davidson, claim it as a virtue that their pictures do not 'pose as art'.

The arguments, put forward from the nineteenth century onwards, about photography sometimes being an art have confused rather than clarified the issue because they have always led to some kind of comparison with the art of painting. And an art of translation cannot usefully be compared to an art of quotation. Their resemblances, their influence one upon the other, are purely formal; functionally they have nothing in common.

Yet however true this may be, a crucial question remains: why can photographs of unknown subjects move us? If photographs do not function like paintings, how do they function? I have argued that photographs quote from appearances. This may suggest that appearances themselves constitute a language.

What sense does it make to say this?

Let me first try to avoid a possible misunderstanding. In his last book Barthes wrote: 'Each time when having gone a little way with a language, I have felt that its system consists in, and in that way is slipping towards, a kind of reductionism and disapproval, I have quietly left and looked elsewhere.'

Unlike their late master, some of Barthes' structuralist followers love closed systems. They would maintain that in my reading of Kertész's photograph, I relied upon a number of semiological systems, each one being a social/cultural construct: the sign language of clothes, of facial expressions, of bodily gestures, of social manners, of photographic framing, etc. Such semiological systems do indeed exist and are continually being used in the making and reading of images. Nevertheless the sum total of these systems cannot exhaust, does not begin to cover, all that can be read in appearances. Barthes himself was of this opinion. The problem of appearances constituting something like a language cannot be resolved simply by reference to these semiological systems.

So we are left with the question: what sense does it make to say that appearances may constitute a language?

Appearances cohere. At the first degree they cohere because of common laws of structure and growth which establish visual affinities. A chip of rock can resemble a mountain; grass grows like hair; waves have the form of valleys; snow is crystalline; the growth of walnuts is constrained in their shells somewhat like the growth of brains in their skulls; all supporting legs and feet, whether static or mobile, visually refer to one another; etc., etc.

At the second degree, appearances cohere because as soon as a fairly developed eye exists, visual imitation begins. All natural camouflage, much natural colouring and a wide range of animal behaviour derive from the principle of appearances fusing or being suggestive of other appearances. On the underside of the wings of the Brassolinae, there are markings which imitate, with great accuracy, the eyes of an owl or another large bird. When attacked, these butterflies flick their wings and their attackers are intimidated by the flashing eyes.

Appearances both distinguish *and* join events.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, when the coherence of appearances had been largely forgotten, one man understood and insisted upon the significance of such a coherence.

> Objects interpenetrate each other. They never cease to live. Imperceptibly they spread intimate reflections around them.
>
> Cézanne

Appearances also cohere within the mind as perceptions. The sight of any single thing or event entrains the sight of other things and events. To recognize an appearance requires the memory of other appearances. And these memories, often projected as expectations, continue to qualify the seen long after the stage of primary recognition. Here for example, we recognize a baby at the breast, but neither our visual memory nor our visual expectations stop there. One image interpenetrates another.

As soon as we say that appearances *cohere* this *coherence* proposes a unity not unlike that of a language.

Seeing and organic life are both dependent upon light, and appearances are the face of this mutuality. And so appearances can be said to be doubly systematic. They belong to a natural affinitive system which exists as such because of certain universal structural and dynamic laws. This is why, as already noted, all legs resemble one another. Secondly, they belong to a perceptive system which organizes the mind's experience of the visible.

The primary energy of the first system is natural reproduction, always thrusting towards the future; the primary energy of the second system is memory, continually retaining the past. In all perceived appearances there is the double traffic of both systems.

We now know that it is the right hemisphere of the human brain which 'reads' and stores our visual experience. This is significant because the areas and centres where this takes place are structurally identical with those in the left hemisphere which process our experience of words. The apparatus with which we deal with appearances is identical with that with which we deal with verbal language. Furthermore, appearances in their unmediated state – that is to say, before they have been interpreted or perceived – lend themselves to reference systems (so that they may be stored at a certain level in the memory) which are comparable to those used for words. And this again prompts one to conclude that appearances possess some of the qualities of a code.

All cultures previous to our own treated appearances as signs addressed to the living. All was *legend*: all was there to be *read* by the eye. Appearances revealed resemblances, analogies, sympathies, antipathies, and each of these conveyed a message. The sum total of these messages explained the universe.

The Cartesian revolution overthrew the basis for any such explanation. It was no longer the relation between the look of things which mattered. What mattered was measurement and difference, rather than visual correspondences. The purely physical could no longer in itself reveal meaning; it could do so only if investigated by reason, which was the probe of the spiritual. Appearances ceased to be double-faced like the words of a dialogue. They became dense and opaque, requiring dissection.

Modern science became possible. The visible, however, deprived of any ontological function, was philosophically reduced to the area of aesthetics. Aesthetics was the study of sensuous perceptions as they affected an individual's feelings. Thus, the reading of appearances became fragmented; they were no longer treated as a signifying whole. Appearances were reduced to contingency, whose meaning was purely personal.

The development may help to explain the fitfulness and erratic history of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century visual art. For the first time ever, visual art was severed from the belief that it was in the very nature of appearances to be meaningful.

If, however, I persist in maintaining that appearances resemble a language, considerable difficulties arise. Where, for example, are its *universals*? A language of appearance implies an encoder; if appearances are there to be read, who wrote them?

It was a rationalist illusion to believe that in dispensing with religion, mysteries would be reduced. What has happened, on the contrary, is that mysteries multiply. Merleau-Ponty wrote:

> We must take literally what vision teaches us, namely that through it we come in contact with the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere all at once, and that even our power to imagine ourselves elsewhere . . . borrows from vision and employs means we owe to it. Vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, 'exterior', foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together*, are 'simultaneity'; this is a mystery psychologists handle the way a child handles explosives.[13]

There is no need to disinter ancient religious and magical beliefs which held that the visible is *nothing except a coded message*. These beliefs, being ahistorical, ignored the coincidence of the historical development of eye *and* brain. They also ignored the coincidence that both seeing and organic life are dependent upon light. Yet the enigma of appearances remains, whatever our historical explanations. Philosophically, we can evade the enigma. But we cannot *look* away from it.

One looks at one's surroundings (and one is always surrounded by the visible, even in dreams) and one reads what is there, according to circumstances, in different ways. Driving a car draws out one kind of reading; cutting down a tree another; waiting for a friend another. Each activity motivates its own reading.

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[13] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 187.

At other times the reading, or the choices which make a reading, instead of being directed towards a goal, are the consequence of an event that has already occurred. Emotion or mood motivates the reading, and the appearances, thus read, become *expressive.* Such moments have often been described in literature, but they do not belong to literature, they belong to the visible.

Ghassan Kanafani, the Palestinian writer, describes a moment when everything he was looking at became expressive of the same pain and determination:

> Never shall I forget Nadia's leg, amputated from the top of the thigh. No! Nor shall I forget the grief which had moulded her face and merged into its traits for ever. I went out of the hospital in Gaza that day, my hand clutched in silent derision on the two pounds I had brought with me to give Nadia. The blazing sun filled the streets with the colour of blood. And Gaza was brand new, Mustafa! You and I never saw it like this. The stones piled up at the beginning of the Shajiya quarter where we lived had a meaning, and they seemed to have been put there for no other reason but to explain it. This Gaza in which we had lived and with whose good people we had spent seven years of defeat was something new. It seemed to me just a beginning. I don't know why I thought it was just a beginning. I imagined that the main street that I walked along on the way back home was only the beginning of a long, long road leading to Safad. Everything in this Gaza throbbed with sadness which was not confined to weeping. It was a challenge; more than that, it was something like reclamation of the amputated leg.[14]

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[14] G. Kanafani, *Men in the Sun* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978), p. 79.

In every act of looking there is an expectation of meaning. This expectation should be distinguished from a desire for an explanation. The one who looks may explain *afterwards*; but, prior to any explanation, there is the expectation of what appearances themselves may be about to reveal.

Revelations do not usually come easily. Appearances are so complex that only the search which is inherent in the act of looking can draw a reading out of their underlying coherence. If, for the sake of a temporary clarification, one artificially separates appearances from vision (and we have seen that in fact this is impossible), one might say that in appearances everything that can be read is already there, but undifferentiated. It is the search, with its choices, which differentiates. And *the seen*, the revealed, is the child of both appearances and the search.

Another way of making this relation clearer would be to say that appearances in themselves are oracular. Like oracles they go beyond, they insinuate further than the discrete phenomena they present, and yet their insinuations are rarely sufficient to make any more comprehensive reading indisputable. The precise meaning of an oracular statement depends upon the quest or need of the one who listens to it. Everyone listens to an oracle alone, even when in company.

The one who looks is essential to the meaning found, *and yet can be surpassed by it*. And this surpassing is what is hoped for. Revelation was a visual category before it was a religious one. The hope of revelation – and this is particularly obvious in every childhood – is the stimulus to the *will* to all looking which does not have a precise functional aim.

Revelation, when what we see does surpass us, is perhaps less rare than is generally assumed. By its nature, revelation does not easily lend itself to verbalization. The words used remain aesthetic exclamations! Yet whatever its frequency, our expectation of revelation is, I would suggest, a human constant. The form of this expectation may historically change, but in itself, it is a constituent of *the relation between the human capacity to perceive and the coherence of appearances.*

The totality of this relationship is perhaps best indicated by saying that appearances constitute a half-language. Such a formulation, suggesting both a resemblance to and a difference from a full language, is both clumsy and imprecise, but at least it opens up a space for a number of ideas.

The positivist view of photography has remained dominant, despite its inadequacies, because no other view is possible unless one comes to terms with the revelational nature of appearances. All the best photographers worked by intuition. In terms of their work, this lack of theory did not matter much. What did matter is that the photographic possibility remained theoretically hidden.

What is this possibility?

The single constitutive choice of a photographer differs from the continuous and more random choices of someone who is looking. Every photographer knows that a photograph simplifies. The simplifications concern focus, tonality, depth, framing, supersession (what is photographed does not change), texture, colour, scale, the other senses (their influence on sight is excluded), the play of light. A photograph quotes from appearances but, in quoting, simplifies them. This simplification can increase their legibility. Everything depends upon the quality of the quotation chosen.

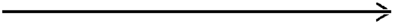
The photograph of the man with the horse quotes very briefly. Kertész's photograph outside Budapest railway station quotes at length.

The 'length' of the quotation has nothing to do with exposure time. It is not a temporal length. Earlier we saw that a photographer, through the choice of the instant photographed, may try to persuade the viewer to lend that instant a past and a future. Looking at the man with the horse, we have no clear idea of what has just happened or what is about to happen. Looking at the Kertész, we can trace a story backwards for years and forwards for at least a few hours. This difference in the narrative range of the two images is important, yet although it may be closely associated with the 'length' of the quotation, it does not in itself represent that length. It is necessary to repeat that the length of the quotation is in no sense a temporal length. It is not time that is prolonged but meaning.

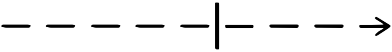
The photograph cuts across time and discloses a cross-section of the event or events which were developing at that instant. We have seen that the instantaneous tends to make meaning ambiguous. But the cross-section, if it is wide enough, and can be studied at leisure, allows us to see the interconnectedness and related coexistence of events. Correspondences, which ultimately derive from the unity of appearances, then compensate for the lack of sequence.

This may become clearer if I express it in a diagrammatic, but necessarily highly schematic, way.

In life it is an event's development in time, its duration, which allows its meaning to be perceived and felt. If one states this actively, one can say that the event moves towards or through meaning. This movement can be represented by an arrow.

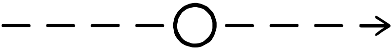


Normally a photograph arrests this movement and cuts across the appearances of the event photographed. Its meaning becomes ambiguous.



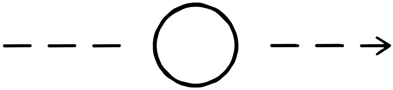
Only by the spectator's lending the frozen appearances a supposed past and future can the arrow's movement be hypothesized.

Above I represented the photographic cut by a vertical line. If, however, one thinks of this cut as a cross-section of the event, one can represent it frontally, as it were, instead of from the side, as a circle. One then has a diagram like this.

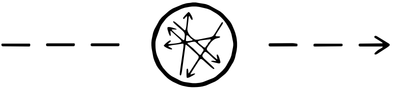


The diameter of the circle depends upon the amount of information to be found in the event's instantaneous appearances. The diameter (the amount of information received) may vary according to the spectator's personal relation to the photographed event. When the man with the horse is a stranger, the diameter remains small, the circle a very reduced one. When the same man is your son, the amount of information gleaned, and the diameter of the circle, increase dramatically.

The exceptional photograph which quotes at length increases the diameter of the circle even when the subject is totally unknown to the spectator.



This increase is achieved by the coherence of the appearances – as photographed at that precise conjuncture – extending the event beyond itself. The appearances of the event photographed implicate other events. It is the energy of these simultaneous connections and cross-references which enlarge the circle beyond the dimension of instantaneous information.



Thus, the discontinuity which is the result of the photographic cut is no longer destructive, for in the photograph of the long quotation another kind of meaning has become possible. The particular event photographed implicates other events by way of an idea born of the appearances of the first event. This idea cannot be merely tautologous. (An image of a person weeping and the idea of suffering would be tautologous.) The idea, confronting the event, extends and joins it to other events, thus widening the diameter.

How is it possible for appearances to 'give birth' to ideas? Through their specific coherence at a given instant, they articulate a set of *correspondences* which provoke in the viewer a recognition of some past experience. This recognition may remain at the level of a tacit agreement with memory, or it may become conscious. When this happens, it is formulated as an idea.

A photograph which achieves expressiveness thus works dialectically: it preserves the particularity of the event recorded, and it chooses an instant when the correspondences of those particular appearances articulate a general idea.

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel defines individuality as follows:

> Every self-consciousness knows itself (1) as universal, as the potentiality of abstracting from everything determinate, and (2) as particular, with a determinate object, content and aim. Still, both these moments are only abstractions; what is concrete and true (and everything true is concrete) is the universality which has the particular as its opposite, but the particular which by its reflection into itself has been equalised with the universal. This unity is individuality.[15]

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[15] Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 7.

In every expressive photograph, in every photograph which quotes at length, the particular, by way of a general idea, has been *equalized with the universal.*

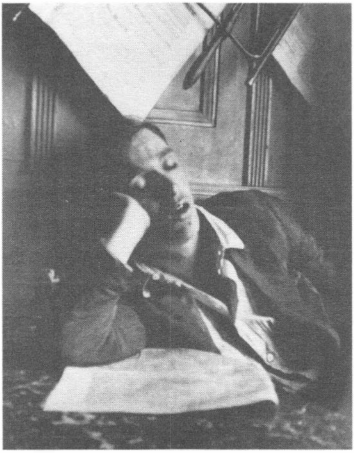
A young man is asleep at the table in a public place, perhaps a café (see p. 94). The expression on his face, his character, the way the light and shade dissolve him and his clothes, his open shirt and the newspaper on the table, his health and his fatigue, the time of night: all these are visually present in this event and are particular.

Emanating from the event and confronting it is the general idea. In this photograph the idea concerns legibility. Or, more precisely, the distinction, the stroke, between legibility / illegibility.

Remove the newspapers on the table and on the wall behind the sleeping figure, and the photograph will no longer be expressive – until or unless what replaces them instigates another idea.

The event instigates the idea. And the idea, confronting the event, urges it to go beyond itself and to represent the generalization (what Hegel calls the abstraction) carried within the idea. We see a particular young man asleep. And seeing him, we ponder on sleep in general. Yet this pondering does not take us away from the particular; on the contrary, it has been instigated by it and everything we continue to read is in the interest of the particular. We think or feel or remember *through the appearances* recorded in the photograph, and *with* the idea of legibility/ illegibility which was instigated by them.

The print of the newspaper the young man was reading before he fell asleep, the print of the newspapers hanging on the wall, which we can almost read even from this distance – all written news, all written regulations and timetables – have for him become temporarily unreadable. And at the same time, what is going on in his sleeping mind, the way he is recovering from his fatigue, are unreadable for us, or for anybody else who was waiting in the



waiting room. Two legibilities. Two illegibilities. The idea of the photo-graph oscillates (like his breathing) between the two poles.

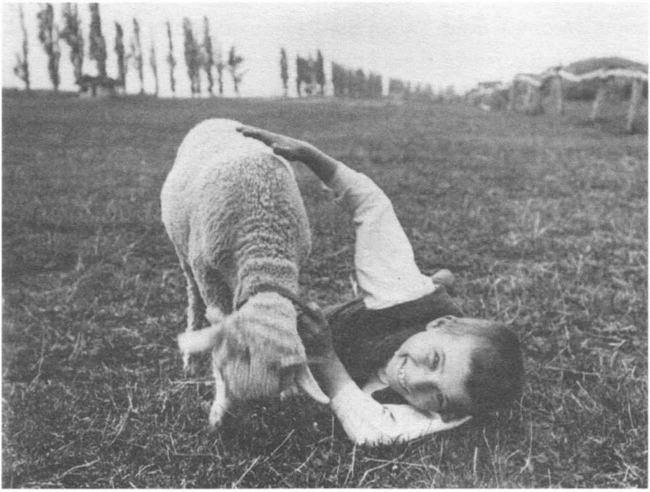
None of this was constructed or planned by Kertész. His task was to be to that degree receptive to the coherence of appearances at that instant from that position in that place. The correspondences, which emerge from this coherence, are too extensive and too interwoven to enumerate very satisfactorily in words. (One cannot take photographs with a dictionary.) Paper corresponds with cloth, with folds, with facial features, with print, with darkness, with sleep, with light, with legibility. In the quality of Kertész's *receptivity* here, one sees how a photograph's lack of intentionality becomes its strength, its lucidity.

A young boy in 1917 playing in a field with a lamb. He is clearly aware of being photographed. He is both exuberant and innocent.

What makes this photograph memorable? Why does it provoke memories in us? We, who are not Hungarian shepherd boys born before the First World War. It is not memorable, as most picture editors might assume, because the boy's expression and gestures are happy and charming. When isolated, photographed gestures and expressions become either mute or caricatural. Here, however, they are not isolated. They contain and are confronted by an idea.

What we see of the lamb – what makes the animal instantly recognizable as a lamb – is the texture of its fleece: that very texture which the boy's hand is stroking and which has attracted him to play with the animal in the way he is. Simultaneously with the texture of the fleece, we notice – or the photograph insists that we notice – the texture of the stubble on which the boy is rolling and which he must feel through his shirt.

The idea within the event, the idea to which Kertész was here receptive, concerns the sense of touch. And how in childhood, everywhere, this sense of touch is especially acute. The photograph is lucid because it speaks, through an idea, to our fingertips, or to our memory of what our fingertips felt.



Event and idea are naturally, actively connected. The photograph frames them, excluding everything else. A particular is being equalized with the universal.

In 'A Red Hussar Leaving' the idea concerns stillness. Everything is read as movement: the trees against the sky, the folds of their clothes, the scene of departure, the breeze that ruffles the baby's hair, the shadow of the trees, the woman's hair on her cheek, the angle at which the rifles are being carried. And within this flux, the idea of stillness is instigated by the look passing between the woman and the man. And the lucidity of this idea makes us ponder on the stillness which is born in every departure.

A pair of lovers are embracing on a park bench (or in a garden?). They are an urban middle-class couple. They are probably unaware of being photographed. Or if they are aware, they have now almost forgotten the camera. They are discreet – as the conventions of their class would demand on any public occasion, with or without cameras – and yet, at the same time, desire (or the longing for desire) is making them (might make them) abandoned. Such is the not uncommon event. What makes it an uncommon photograph is that the special coherence of everything we see in it – the concealing screen of the hedge behind them, her gloves, the cuffs of their jackets with the same buttons on them, the movements of their hands, the touching of their noses, the darkness which marries their tailored clothes and the shade of the hedge, the light which illuminates leaves and skin – this coherence instigates the idea of the stroke dividing decorum/desire, clothed/unclothed, occasion/privacy. And such a division is a universal adult experience.

Kertész himself said: 'The camera is my tool. Through it I give reason to everything around me.' It may be possible to construct a theory upon the specific photographic process of 'giving reason'.

Let us summarize. Photographs quote from appearances. The taking-out of the quotation produces a discontinuity, which is reflected in the ambiguity of a photograph's meaning. All photo-

graphed events are ambiguous, except to those whose personal relation to the event is such that their own lives supply the missing continuity. Usually, in public the ambiguity of photographs is hidden by the use of words which explain, less or more truthfully, the pictured events.

The expressive photograph – whose expressiveness can contain its ambiguity of meaning and 'give reason' to it – is a long quotation from appearances: the length here to be measured not by time but by a greater extension of meaning. Such an extension is achieved by turning the photograph's discontinuity to advantage. The narration is broken. (We do not know why the young man asleep is waiting for a train, supposing that that is what he is doing.) Yet the very same discontinuity, by preserving an instantaneous set of appearances, allows us to read across them and to find a synchronic coherence. A coherence which, instead of narrating, instigates ideas. Appearances have this coherent capacity because they constitute something approaching a language. I have referred to this as a half-language.

The half-language of appearances continually arouses an expectation of further meaning. We seek revelation with our eyes. In life this expectation is only rarely met. Photography confirms this expectation and confirms it in a way which can be shared (as we shared the reading of these photographs by Kertész). In the expressive photograph, appearances cease to be oracular and become elucidatory. It is this confirmation which moves us.

Apart from the event photographed, apart from the lucidity of the idea, we are moved by the photograph's fulfilment of an expectation which is intrinsic to the will to look. The camera completes the half-language of appearances and articulates an unmistakable meaning. When this happens we suddenly find ourselves at home among appearances, as we are at home in our mother tongue.

1982

Editor's note

The quotation on pp. 82–3 is Berger's own translation from the French. The passage is translated differently in Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 8.

Stories

If photographs quote from appearance and if expressiveness is achieved by what we have termed the long quotation, then the possibility suggests itself of composing with numerous quotations, of communicating not with single photographs but with groups or sequences. But how should these sequences be constructed? Can one think in terms of a truly photographic narrative form?

There is already an established photographic practice which uses pictures in sequence: the reportage photo-story. These certainly narrate, but they narrate descriptively from the outsider's point of view. A magazine sends photographer X to city Y to bring back pictures. Many of the finest photographs taken belong to this category. But the story told is finally about what the photographer saw at Y. It is not directly about the experience of those living the event in Y. To speak of their experience with images it would be necessary to introduce pictures of other events and other places, because subjective experience always connects. Yet to introduce such pictures would be to break the journalistic convention.

Reportage photo-stories remain eye-witness accounts rather than stories, and this is why they have to depend on words in order to overcome the inevitable ambiguity of the images. In reports ambiguities are unacceptable; in stories they are inevitable.

If there is a narrative form unique to photography, will it not resemble that of the cinema? Surprisingly, photographs are the opposite of films. Photographs are retrospective and are received as such: films are anticipatory. Before a photograph you search for *what was there*. In a cinema you wait for what is to come next. All film narratives are, in this sense, *adventures*: they advance, they arrive. The term *flashback* is an admission of the inexorable impatience of the film to move forward.

By contrast, if there is a narrative form intrinsic to still photography, it will search for what happened, as memories or reflections do. Memory itself is not made up of flashbacks, each one forever moving inexorably forwards. Memory is a field where different times coexist. The field is continuous in terms of the subjectivity which creates and extends it, but temporarily it is discontinuous.

Among the ancient Greeks, Memory was the mother of all the Muses, and was perhaps most closely associated with the practice of poetry. Poetry at that time, as well as being a form of storytelling, was also an inventory of the visible world; metaphor after metaphor was given to poetry by way of visual correspondences.

Cicero, discussing the poet Simonides who was credited with the invention of the art of memory, wrote:

> It has been sagaciously discerned by Simonides or else discovered by some other person, that the most complete pictures are formed in our minds of the things that have been conveyed to them and imprinted on them by the senses, but that the keenest of all our senses is the sense of sight, and that consequently perceptions received by the ears or by reflection can be most easily retained if they are also conveyed to our minds by the mediation of the eyes.

A photograph is simpler than most memories, its range more limited. Yet with the invention of photography we acquired a new means of expression more closely associated with memory than any other. The Muse of photography is not one of Memory's daughters, but Memory herself. Both the photograph and the remembered depend upon and equally oppose the passing of time. Both preserve moments, and propose their own form of simultaneity, in which all their images can coexist. Both stimulate, and are stimulated by, the interconnectedness of events. Both seek instants of revelation, for it is only such instants which give full reason to their own capacity to withstand the flow of time.

In *Another Way of Telling* we built a sequence of, not four, but a hundred and fifty images. It is entitled 'If Each Time—'. Otherwise there is no text. No words redeem the ambiguity of the images. The sequence begins with certain memories of a childhood, but it does not then follow a chronology. There is no storyline as there is in a *photo-roman.* There is, as it were, no seat supplied for the reader. The reader is free to make his own way *through* these images. The first reading across any two pages may tend to proceed from left to right like European print, but subsequently one can wander in any direction without, we hope, losing a sense of tension or unfolding. Nevertheless we constructed the sequence *as a story*. It is intended to narrate. What can it mean to assert this? If such a thing exists, what is the photographic narrative form?

To try to answer the question, let me first return to the traditional story.

The dog came out of the forest is a simple statement. When that sentence is followed by *The man left the door open*, the possibility of a narrative has begun. If the tense of the second sentence is changed into *The man had left the door open*, the possibility becomes almost a promise. Every narrative proposes an agreement about the unstated but assumed connections existing between events.

One can lie on the ground and look up at the almost infinite number of stars in the night sky, but in order to tell stories about those stars they need to be seen as constellations, the invisible lines which can connect them need to be assumed.

No story is like a wheeled vehicle whose contact with the road is continuous. Stories walk, like animals or men. And their steps are not only between narrated events but between each sentence, sometimes each word. Every step is a stride over something not said.

The suspense story is a modern invention (Poe, 1809–49) and consequently today one may tend to overestimate the role of suspense, the waiting-for-the-end, in storytelling. The essential tension in a story lies elsewhere. Not so much in the mystery of its destination as in the mystery of the spaces between its steps towards that destination.

All stories are discontinuous and are based on a tacit agreement about what is not said, about what connects the discontinuities. The question then arises: who makes this agreement with whom? One is tempted to reply: the teller and the listener. Yet neither teller nor listener is at the centre of the story: they are at its periphery. Those whom the story is about are at the centre. It is between their actions and attributes and reactions that the unstated connections are being made.

One can ask the same question in another way. When the tacit agreement is acceptable to the listener, when a story makes sense of its discontinuities, it acquires authority as a story. But where is this authority? In whom is it invested? In one sense, it is invested in nobody and it is nowhere. Rather, the story invests with authority its characters, its listener's past experience and its teller's words. And it is the authority of all these together that makes the action of the story – what happens in it – worthy of the action of its being told, and vice versa.

The discontinuities of the story and the tacit agreement underlying them fuse teller, listener and protagonists into an amalgam. An amalgam which I would call the story's *reflecting subject*. The story narrates on behalf of this subject, appeals to it and speaks in its voice.

If this sounds unnecessarily complicated, it is worth remembering for a moment the childhood experience of being told a story. Were not the excitement and assurance of that experience precisely the result of the mystery of such a fusion? You were listening. You were in the story. You were in the words of the storyteller. You were no longer your single self; you were, thanks to the story, *everyone it concerned.*

The essence of that childhood experience remains in the power and appeal of any story which has authority. A story is not simply an exercise in empathy. Nor is it merely a meeting-place for the protagonists, the listener and the teller. A story being told is a unique process which fuses these three categories into one. And ultimately what fuses them, within the process, are the discontinuities, the silent connections, agreed upon in common.

Supposing one tries to narrate with photography. The technique of the *photo-roman* offers no solution, for there photography is only a means of reproducing a story constructed according to the conventions of the cinema or theatre. The characters are actors, the world is a decor. Supposing one tries to arrange a number of photographs, chosen from the billions which exist, so that the arrangement speaks of experience. Experience as contained within a life or lives. If this works, it may suggest a narrative form specific to photography.

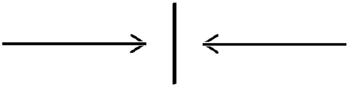
The discontinuities within the arrangement will be far more evident than those in a verbal story. Each single image will be more or less discontinuous with the next. Continuities of time, place or action may occur, but will be rare. On the face of it there will be no story. And yet in storytelling, as I have tried to show above, it is precisely an agreement about discontinuities which allows the listener to 'enter the narration' and become part of its reflecting subject. The essential relation between teller, listener (spectator) and protagonist(s) may still be possible with an arrangement of photographs. It is, I believe, only their roles, relative to one another, which are modified, not their essential relationship.

The spectator (listener) becomes more active because the assumptions behind the discontinuities (the unspoken which bridges them) are more far-reaching. The teller becomes less present, less insistent, for he no longer employs words of his own; he speaks only through quotations, through his choice and placing of the photographs. The protagonist (at least in our story) becomes omnipresent and therefore invisible; she is manifest in each connection made. One might say that she is defined by *the way she wears the world*, the world about which the photographs supply information. Before she wears it, it is her experience which sews it together.

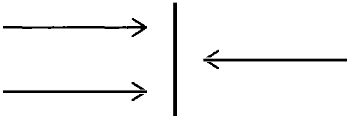
If, despite these changes of role, there is still the fusion, the amalgam of the *reflecting subject*, one can still talk of a narrative form. Every kind of narrative situates its reflecting subject differently. The epic form placed it before fate, before destiny. The nineteenth-century novel placed it before the individual choices to be made in the area where public and private life overlap. (The novel could not narrate the lives of those who virtually had no choice.) The photographic narrative form places it before the task of memory: the task of continually *resuming* a life being lived in the world. Such a form is not concerned with events as facts – such as is always claimed for photography; it is concerned with their assimilation, their gathering and their transformation into experience.

The precise nature of this as yet experimental narrative form may become still clearer if I very briefly discuss its use of montage. If it does narrate, it does so through its montage.

Eisenstein once spoke of 'a montage of attractions'. By this he meant that what precedes the film-cut should attract what follows it, and vice versa. The energy of this attraction could take the form of a contrast, an equivalence, a conflict, a recurrence. In each case, the cut becomes eloquent and functions like the hinge of a metaphor. The energy of such a montage of attractions could be shown like this:



Yet there was in fact an intrinsic difficulty in applying this idea to film. In a film, with its thirty-two frames per second, there is always a third energy in play: that of the reel, that of the film's running through time. And so the two attractions in a film montage are never equal. They are like this:

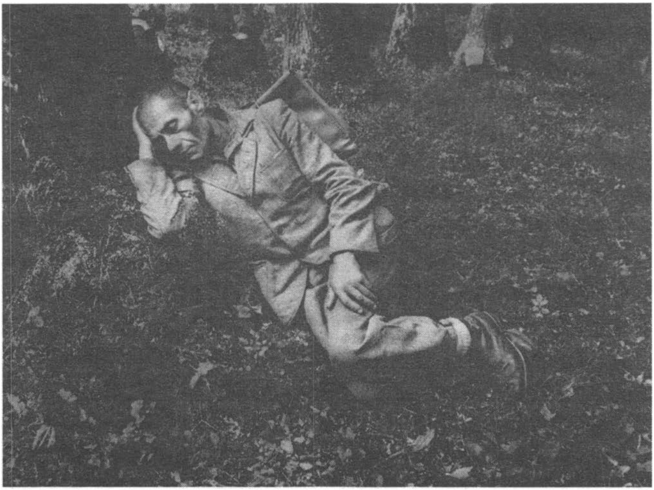


In a sequence of still photographs, however, the energy of attraction, either side of a cut, does remain equal, two-way and *mutual*. Such an energy then closely resembles the stimulus by which one memory triggers another, irrespective of any hierarchy, chronology or duration.

In fact, the energy of the montage of attractions in a sequence of still photographs destroys the very notion of *sequences* – the word which, up to now, I have been using for the sake of convenience. The sequence has become a field of coexistence like the field of memory.

Photographs so placed are restored to a living context: not of course to the original temporal context from which they were taken – that is impossible – but to a context of experience. And there, *their ambiguity at last becomes true*. It allows what they show to be appropriated by reflection. The world they reveal, frozen, becomes tractable. The information they contain becomes permeated by feeling. Appearances become the language of a lived life.

1982



Christ of the Peasants

Markéta Luskačová: *Pilgrims*

I try to imagine how to describe the pilgrim photographs of Markéta Luskačová to somebody who could not see them. An obviously vain exercise in one sense, because appearances and words speak so differently; the visual never allows itself to be translated intact into the verbal. Nothing I could say would enable the reader to imagine a single one of these pictures. Yet what of those who, finding themselves before the photographs, still have difficulty in seeing them? There are good reasons why this might happen. The pictures are of peasants whose experience over the centuries has been very rarely understood by other classes. Worse than that, the pictures are about the experience of religious faith when today most city-dwellers – at least in our continent – have become accustomed to living without any religious belief. Finally, even for the religious minority the pictures may well suggest fanaticism or heresy, because priests and the Church have for so long oppressed peasants, and this oppression has encouraged on both sides the recurring suspicion that principles are being betrayed. The Christ of the peasants has never been the Christ of the papacy. How, then, would I describe the photographs to somebody who could not see them?

I'm inclined to believe that Markéta Luskačová had a secret assignment, such as no photographer had had before. She was summoned by the Dead. How she joined them I don't know. The Dead live, of course, beyond time and are ageless; yet, thanks to the constant arrival of newcomers, they are aware of what happens in history, and sometimes this general, vast awareness of theirs provokes a kind of curiosity so that they want to know more. This curiosity led them to summon a photographer. They told her how they had the impression – and it had been growing for a century or more – that they, the Dead, were being forgotten by the living to an unprecedented degree. Let her understand clearly what they were talking about: the individual Dead had always been quickly or slowly forgotten – it was not this which was new. But now it appeared that the huge, in fact countless, collective of the Dead was being forgotten, as if the living had become – was it ashamed or was it simply negligent? – of their own mortality, of the very consanguinity which joined them to the Dead. Of this, they said they needed no proof, there was ample evidence. What they would like to see – supposing that somewhere in the heart of the continent in which she lived they still existed – were people who still remembered the Dead. Neither the bereaved (for bereavement is temporary) nor the morbid (for they are obsessed by death, not by the Dead), but people living their everyday lives while looking further, beyond, aware of the Dead as neighbours.

'We would like you,' they told her, 'to do a reportage on *us*, in the eyes of the living: can you do that?' She did not reply, for she already knew, although she was only in her early twenties, that the only possible reply could be in the images developed in a darkroom.

Soon after, Markéta Luskačová found herself in the village of Sumiac. Before beginning her assignment proper, she took some pictures to remind the long-departed of the earth on which everything happens. A woman and a horse, with the grass cropped and the footpaths going as far back as living memory. A man sowing, striding slowly through the field he has ploughed, the gesture of his arm like that of a cellist. Three children asleep in a bed.

Then she moved on to the unprecedented challenge of her commission. The people she was photographing trusted her; more than that, they allowed her to become intimate. This was a precondition for her assignment, for she could not photograph the presence of the Dead in the lives of the living from afar: a telescopic lens in this case would have been useless. Nor could she be in a hurry. Intimacy implies having time on one's hands, even a kind of boredom. And further, she could not be in a hurry because the project demanded isolating an instant filled with the timeless, and isolating a set of appearances containing the invisible. These were not impossible demands, since the human eye and the human face are windows on to the soul.

In some pictures she failed – failed for a simple and understandable reason. Sometimes the people being photographed were aware of her being there with her camera, they trusted her completely and so they appealed for recognition. In a flash they imagined how: *Take Us Now = We'll See How We Were at This Moment.*

In other pictures she succeeded; she carried out the assignment and she produced photos such as nobody had ever taken before. We see the photographed in all their intimacy and they are not *there*; they are *elsewhere* with their neighbours: the dead, the unborn, the absent. For instance, her extraordinary photo of the Sleeping Man might be a companion piece to a poem by Rilke:

> . . . You, neighbour God, if sometimes in the night
> I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so
> only because I seldom hear you breathe
> and know: you are alone.
> And should you need a drink, no one is there
> to reach it to you, groping in the dark.
> Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.
> I am quite near.
> Between us there is but a narrow wall,
> and by sheer chance; for it would take

merely a call from your lips or from mine
to break it down,
and that without a sound.

The wall is builded of your images . . .

To stop there would be too resolved, too 'transcendental' for the peasant experience which Markéta Luskačová interprets so faithfully. The peasant, within the secrecy of his own mind, is independent, and he projects this independence on to those he worships. *Nothing is ever quite arranged.*

Italo Calvino has recorded a story from the countryside near Verona; and I think of it when, for instance, I look at the picture of the builders at Sumiac eating a meal:

Once there was a farmer who was devout, but who prayed only to St Joseph. When he died, St Peter refused to let him into heaven. 'No question,' said St Peter, 'you forgot about Christ, God the Father and the Virgin.' 'Since I'm here,' replied the man, 'could I have a word with Joseph?' Joseph appeared, recognized the farmer and said: 'Come in, make yourself at home.' 'I can't,' complained the man, 'Peter here has forbidden me to enter heaven.' Joseph turned to Peter and angrily remonstrated: 'You let him in here, or I'll take my son and my wife and we'll go somewhere else to build paradise!'

1985

W. Eugene Smith

Notes to Help Documentary Film-Maker Kirk Morris Make a Film about Smith

It's not possible to make a biographical documentary – plus sequences of his own photos – because the true drama of Smith's life and work are not *explicit*. It would be possible, for instance, to use such a method concerning Van Gogh because we have his letters which relate his life with incredible insight. Smith's writings are, by contrast, mostly rantings. Thus the material for a biography is not already there. It has to be written and invented by the film-maker and because the subjective elements in this story are so important – as with the story of any artist – such invention will have to approach fiction. We have the facts of his life but all of them have to be interpreted and ideally these interpretations should lead us to see his work more clearly.

Where did this man come from?

The question is not just geographical but cultural, social, historical. Where did he learn his ideals, his fears, his special kind of pride? He's a man from mid-America. Essentially, he is more like a railroad man, a lumberjack or a folk-singer like Woody Guthrie, than like a New York or European artist of the same epoch. Compare by contrast a man like Arthur Miller or Thornton Wilder. Behind most of Smith's images there is the harshness of a work song: the virtue of virility: the simple destiny of victory or defeat. Such men carry, buried within them, a shyness. And this adds to the image of a typical, Midwest hero. I emphasize this because Smith's physical appearance, especially during the second half of his life, tends to mask this truth and his letters should never be taken as *evidence*. He uses words to make a noise to match the totally inarticulate noise he hears in his head. Smith abuses words and he mistrusted them. This is why he made puns. He wanted to outwit words. One finds the same kind of thing sometimes in bar-room talk.

What drove this man, what demon gave him such energy?

His devotion to photography. His art. But how did he see art? His attitude to words, music, his own art was essentially religious. He saw art as a means of redemption. Music, words, were to him an accompaniment to the drama of looking for goodness. His own photography constituted his way of looking for this, his search.

He was not a cultivated man for this implies belonging to a privileged culture. He was a loner. He sought a truth which, by its nature, was not evident. It was waiting to be revealed by him and him alone. He wanted his images to convert so that the spectator might see beyond the lies, the vanity, the illusions of everyday life. In this profound sense of searching for the immanent truth he was, I believe, the most *religious* photographer in the history of the art. A seer in both the photographic and biblical senses of the term.

His unique use of black and white was intimately tied to his sense of vocation. Through blackness he makes the world his own – turns it into a dark, terrible, moral theatre where souls search for beauty or redemption. (It would be worth looking at some medieval morality plays to find a scene to match this process.) Sometimes the drama which he puts on the stage of his photo is in the subject as given at that moment. The war pictures, for example. But often it is not, often the drama comes from within Smith's vision; then he imposes his vision on what is in front of him with a massive dramatic weight. For example, the evil drama of the three Guardia Civil. For example, the good drama of some of his pictures of Albert Schweitzer in action. His photography uses a biblical language.

Black, for Smith, was the valley of the shadow of death. Light was hope. Compare some of his photos with both icons and certain early Flemish paintings. Not so much from the point of view of light and shade as from that of their expression (the expression of faces) and the relation between figures and background. His most successful pictures look more at home in a church than in a museum. He dreams of speaking to a congregation.

What first formed this man?

How did the moral drama, which is so integral a part of his photography, first begin for him? Unquestionably, profoundly and until the end, it began with his mother. She was, in my opinion, the beginning and end of Gene. All the other women in his life were only planets round her sun (son).

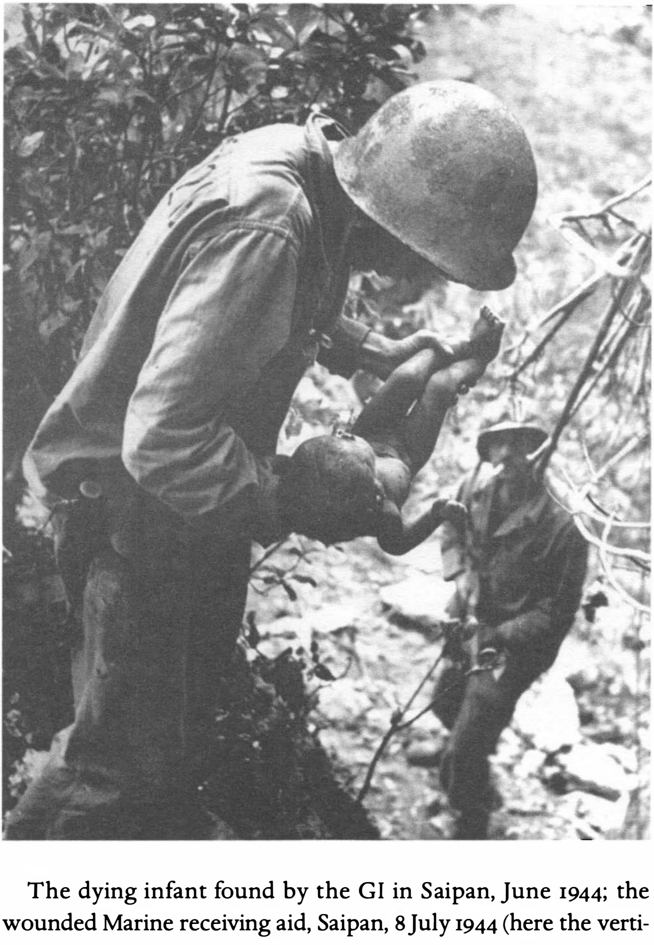
Their relationship was charged with a devotional love, but its language, its form of exchange, was, I suspect, emotional blackmail. Most of Smith's dealings with the world (apart from his photography) were based on the same principle – including, most obviously, all his repeated threats of suicide. He learnt the principle from his mother. She, in her own way, practised it on him. The tools of the blackmail were moralistic and biblical in their scale: sin, the wickedness of the world, the salvation of the soul, future justice, death.

Her son comes to believe that he is only lovable when he is being punished; the punishment comes inextricably mixed with her love and her hopes for him. Like us all, he wanted to be loved and so his life, which more than most men he decided for himself, becomes a story of punishments. To use the term masochist would be a cheap and vulgar simplification. Because from his mother he acquired, not only the habit of punishment, but also the principle of pity and the need to save the world. (Of course his capacity for pity was far greater than hers. In some ways she was perhaps a ruthless woman. Nevertheless I think it was she who taught him the principle of pity.)

What is the genius of his photography?

The authenticity of Smith's photography does not come from his objectivity but from its selectivity. Of the great masters of reportage and of photographic storytelling, Smith is probably the most subjective. For him, appearances only reveal the truth very occasionally. And for him the rest of the time they were lies. For him, Pittsburgh represented the human condition at that time. Far more than a city, it was life on this earth. This is why the project grew so uncontrollably.

Now we can return to our title and to the image of a Pietà – of the man-Christ dead in his mother's lap. An image of tenderness and bereavement. The figure of the victim, suffering or dead, is, by its nature, horizontal. The figure of the healer or the mourner is vertical. The two form a kind of cross and this is where we can notice a simple but quite surprising fact. Among Eugene Smith's fifty most renowned photographs this theme recurs again and again. Sometimes the focus is almost exclusively on the horizontal figure, with only a suggestion of the vertical one. Sometimes the two figures are viewed frontally, sometimes laterally. But again and again we find the same emotional theme of the horizontal sufferer being nursed or mourned or held by somebody, vertical, and moved by pity. Here is a list of some of these outstanding photographs:



The dying infant found by the GI in Saipan, June 1944; the wounded Marine receiving aid, Saipan, 8 July 1944 (here the vertical figure is symbolized by the water flask being proffered to the victim); the temporary hospital in Leyte, November 1944; the dying man being carried in the battle of Okinawa; the country doctor treating the small baby with a cut on her forehead; many of the images from the story about Maude Callen, the midwife: the wake in the Spanish village; the operation in Schweitzer's hospital; (at the end of his life as a kind of terrible summary of them all) the unforgettable photograph of Tomoko Uemura being bathed by her mother.

Smith identifies with the horizontal figure. This is not to say that he takes himself to be Christ but he identifies with the victim who has suffered unjust punishment. Like his mother, he hated, I think, most of what happened in the world, particularly the metropolitan world, the vicious world of Babylon. He believed profoundly in the Fall of Man. His life's duty was to stalk this world and to lie in wait for its rare moments of nobility, its redemption from the Fall. These were the moments he wished to record. Not only to record but to show in all their terrible glory. The means he had for expressing this glory were black and white. Such moments he then offered back to the world as a form of catharsis. An interesting confirmation of all the above is his very famous picture of the two children walking away from the adult world, their backs towards us, into a glade of light. They are leaving the Fall behind them and Smith himself entitled the picture 'The Walk to Paradise Garden'. It might be possible to deal with this theme by a montage of Renaissance paintings, beginning with Masaccio's *Expulsion* and ending with Grünewald's *Resurrection.*

This view had a lot to do with his running battles with editors. He became a hero of modern photographers because he continually protested against the dishonest or vulgar or over-sentimental use of any of his pictures, and since this is common practice he was entirely justified. Yet Smith's opposition to editorial interference of his intentions had an even deeper basis for he saw, not only certain pictures being misused, but a whole view of the world being substituted for another view. A frivolous one for a sombre, moral one. A magazine cover for a Pietà.

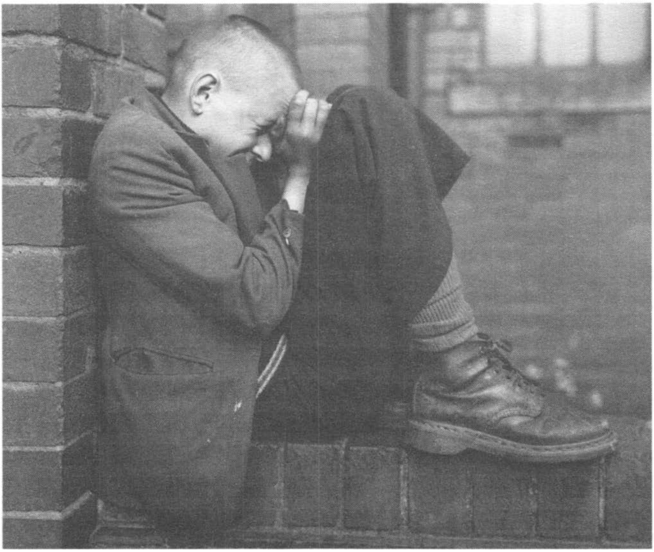
Finally we come to the fulcrum of his genius. He accepted his mother's sombre, condemning view of the world but he judged it far less harshly than she did because he turned the love that he knew through her into a principle to be searched for wherever he went. Love is always, among other things, pity. This is the love of the vertical figure. The love of the mourner and the healer; the love of the survivor for the dead.

Thus we have found an answer to the first and most obvious question, which I didn't pose at the beginning because it would have set up too many prejudices. How is it that a man as pathologically egocentric as Eugene Smith, and as obsessively selfish as he often was, how is it that he could produce some of the most deeply human photographs of our time? A similar question can be asked about many artists. But in each case the answer has to be specific. There was only one Eugene Smith and he had only one mother.

[written *c*.1988]

Editor's note

When Smith arrived in Pittsburgh in 1955 for a small-scale commission (the project referred to on p. 114), he was expected to stay for a couple of weeks. He ended up spending a year making over ten thousand exposures of every facet of the city and then a further two years trying to print and edit the mass of material into an order that would do justice to 'the tremendous unity of [his] convictions'. By 1959, he had settled for publishing a mere thirty-eight pages of photographs. For more on the Pittsburgh project, see Sam Stephenson, *Dream Street: W. Eugene Smith's Pittsburgh Project* (New York: Norton, 2001).



Walking Back Home

Chris Killip: *In Flagrante*

(with Sylvia Grant)

Last Tuesday was the 'Glorious Thirteenth' – the day of the Department of Employment. A place from which we rarely depart for employment. A place where we exchange embarrassment and dependency. It's a journey I make as though I were a little lost girl and my mind never wanders. I catch two buses and I'd prefer to catch them to the dentist's. Our disenchantment exchange. It's a small, long, narrow old building near a fire and railway station. And there we go on our numbered days with our numbered cards and our numbered souls and my mind never wanders. It's painted green; it's long and narrow with grilled windows and long narrow queues. There aren't any green maidenhair ferns or subtle chrome shades. Only fluorescent lights cruelly illuminate our passivity. Posters, detailing all our relevant claims, adorn one wall: UBs, 567s, ABCs. My mind never wanders. The only welfare benefit not advertised is the Death Grant – they rightly assume we've already been there. To sit upon those chairs, upon which you wait only to be called. To rise. To find yourself at a loss, to find yourself a pen and then to make that most sweet and volatile of sounds, a name, silently.

*

To the photographs in his book *In Flagrante* Chris Killip has added two very short texts. His own terse note of explanation ending with the statement, this 'is a fiction about metaphor'. Fiction, I think, because it is a story, not just information. About a human tragedy, not an accident. Metaphor because it is through metaphor that, at first and last, we seek for meaning.

Secondly he has added the searingly apt poem by W. B. Yeats. I say searingly, for it is as if all the photos here have been branded, like a hundred cattle, with the tenderness of those eight lines.

This, our dialogue at the end, is addressed to the reader who is walking back home.

So much that comes from the brightest and best of human instincts is subject to a dry, formal and orderly disintegration. It is happening to this town. There were instincts here as strong, courageous, subtle, supple as anywhere and they were concentrated. Now capital, talent, energy has left, is leaving the place. The town seems sometimes like a black hole that the hills are about to cave in upon.

No new programme of the Labour Party, no new merger of the SDP and the Liberals, not even the Communist Manifesto is going to address the plight of the childhoods, adolescences, virilities, motherhoods and old ages written off here.

There are days, even here where the light is often a strange depleted substance – milk that someone has taken the cream from – there are days when the sun does shine, and somebody with rugged hands shall turn to me on a bus, touch me, give me a smile, and it all becomes an inheritance borne willingly. It was so for my grandfather, my father, my mother.

All but one of the pictures were taken in the North-East of England around Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The coal trade began in this area in the thirteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century George Stephenson started his ironworks in Newcastle. The first locomotives were manufactured there. Ships from Tyneside were famous in ports all over the world. The docks exported coal, iron, steel. Around these activities there developed fine skills, special kinds of courage, prides, struggles, solidarities, which were passed on from generation to generation.

I respect men's brittle strength and feel they are more easily broken. Women are fragile but supple. We don't always break so easy, we crack, we splinter. Ever heard the saying 'She was a china teacup, he was only a mug'? Perhaps incongruous when placed together, but both can hold refreshment. Gifts for each other.

Today the shipyards are silent, many of the mines are closed, the factories shattered, the furnaces cold. The tragedy of this has little to do with new technology as such, or with so-called post-industrialism. It stems, it bleeds, not from the fact that science has discovered electronics, but from the fact that everything which constituted the loves of those living here is now being treated as irrelevant.

Photography has often been used, in a documentary spirit, to record and reveal social conditions. Collected together in exhibitions or books, such work showed to the relatively privileged how the 'other half' lived: sub-proletarians, common soldiers on battlefields, poor farmers, emigrants on ships, the unemployed, the homeless. Whatever the specific subject, the purpose was usually to move the conscientious public to action or protest so that the social conditions might be improved. Look at what is happening! Should this be allowed to continue? Sometimes the future was invoked in a more triumphant sense: look at the richness of the Family of Man, we must do justice to our global heritage!

In Flagrante does not belong to this tradition. Chris Killip is adamantly aware that a better future for the photographed is unlikely.

The debris visible in his photos, the debris which surrounds his protagonists, is already part of a future which has been chosen – and chosen, according to the laws of our particular political system, democratically.

Since Mrs Thatcher was first voted into office the number of people living below even the official poverty lines has doubled. They now number about 12 million. By contrast, during the last four years, the number of millionaires in the country has risen from 7,000 to 20,000. In the North-East it is estimated that there are 1,500 deaths a year due to exposure or starvation. The infamous distinction between the South and North is not one between wealth and poverty but between the safeguarded and the abandoned.

Remember the word 'love'. It was often here. All through childhood, it was here, at the corner shop, on the bus, at the ice-cream van, it was a word preceding others and leading to others, a word of progression, movement, a beginning and an end, a word which was around me all the time. Now it's a word we are sensitive of using; we have heard that to use it often, is to use it lightly. It never felt that way for me. It was a word with substance, surety, certainty. Among lives which bore so much insecurity and social suffering, there was a word which gave security. Yes, Luv.

On page 56 there is a photograph of an old-fashioned ruin, the only picture in the book not taken around the North-East. It is a romantic image – full of a type of grandeur. The new ruins are of a very different character. Thin, torn, worn-out, empty. Circuits which have been liquidated. Spaces which have been abandoned. Zones of the written-off.

In these zones, even the ground is smashed – garden soil, doorsteps, pavements, kerbstones, roads. As if everything, once loved, was now chipped and in pieces.

*

Those men. I'll never forget those men, the ones whose fingers didn't resemble mine, the ones who cried to thank me for staying with them as they smoked a cigarette, the ones who are on the bottom line of 'for each according to his ability'. They'll be there, still in Cedar Ward, they'll be with me all my life, because they're someone's father, and if they aren't then they can be mine. My father would have wished it. Forget 'England Made Me': visits to a hospital helped to make me. And to make me angry.

It's about nature and man. I saw how random and cruel nature can be. I learnt how calculating and cruel man can be. It was the time when the first cut-backs began to take effect. And I knew right from wrong. That it was wrong for the wounded to be the bottom line on a statement of accounts. I could see nature was cruel, but also that those with the swiftest transport, those with houses of strong foundations, escape the harsh effects of floods and earthquakes.

All I know is we require an equal share of protection. The dividends are long overdue.

The abandoned are those born into zones where it is no longer possible to earn a living, and where the idea of any future has been ruptured. The safeguarded are those, elsewhere, who believe that the future belongs only to the profit motive. The profit motive, however, is always clothed in robes which moralize. For example, a secretary to a northern city's Chamber of Commerce declared, 'There are the people who aspire, and the people who can't or won't aspire.'[16] The latter of course live in the zones.

I saw an elderly man with a Tesco carrier and a walking stick. I was on the escalator going down and the one going up was, as usual, broken. If there's a certainty in life, it's that the escalator going up is broken and your shopping bag's full. He was walking up the endless stairs and mildly

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[16] Quoted by Ian Jack in *Before the Oil Ran Out* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987).

struggling. Only struggling mildly. If he had been more obviously disabled or had been a mother struggling with shopping and a pram, he would have rightly inspired sympathy. He was just a little, tired, unknown man struggling mildly. He was just an old man who had maybe paid his taxes, fought for his country. This beautiful individualism they talk of. By the time this particular man reaches the top of the stairs, his individual legs will feel too tired for this particular concept to bloom. Of course if he had power, money or even just a car, his individualism might flourish. I don't understand what political people of power mean by that word. Lots of people I know on estates, in hospitals, in unemployment queues, now walk on their individual knees and their individual heads are bowed and they haven't the energy to strengthen their individual spines.

In the sky, beyond every photograph in this book, is reflected the blind indifference of the new individualism. Finally history will not forgive this indifference. Meanwhile in its monstrous light something else becomes visible.

When the first factories and mines were built in the North of England and Scotland, when the first proletariat ever created, surged in and out of the iron gates, before barbed wire had been invented, and, a little later, when Engels and Mayhew made their pioneer voyages of horrified discovery, the world of 'the labouring classes' was thought of as an underworld, its inhabitants subhuman, their impulses 'animal', their fates unknowable yet nevertheless the issue of unnameable sins!

Many of the terms used to describe this underworld were borrowed from those which had been used to justify the slave trade, whose profits had supplied the first capital for launching the new industries.

Today theoreticians of the New Right denigrate the written-off in a similar spirit. The epithets may have changed, but not the principle whereby they explain that the wretchedness they themselves impose is the consequence of the moral debility of the 'wretched'.

What has become visible and obvious is that this is a lie. This first equality *has* been won. It confers no protection, guarantees no rights. It simply recognizes that those living today in the zones of abandonment differ in no essential way from anybody else.

Not knowing where the dead, the unborn, the skeletons, the embryos live or lie, the dead I see often in the expressions of living eyes, when talking with integrity of other times. Or sometimes in a phrase. I hear a phrase on a bus, full of ambiguity, tenacity and gentility, just a few words spoken to another, and I think to myself: People have been speaking so for centuries. Many places can offer a welcome and sometimes it's all in a phrase, a few words which seem to carry time and life, and each time they're spoken or heard, they restore, re-establish a beauty. And I want to turn round and say 'Did you hear that? Doesn't it make you feel warm, homely, legitimate?'

An elderly man picks over rubbish.

The sea shuts in and, on its beaches, washes up flotsam and jetsam.

Kids sniff glue and find a way out.

Here there will be no more silver-wedding presents.

The travelling people, men and women with saddleless horses who have survived from another century, look across at the ruin of all that once relegated them to the past. They are experts in obsolescence.

⋆

On these last reaches, people make love, children are born, grandmothers make pies, families go to the seaside. And they all know what is happening: the boot is being put into the future.

Intently a boy holds a frog in his hand. He's studying it.

Saying what?

I have you. There're my boots on the ground below the sky. In the middle there's you and I only. When I want to, I'll let you go, but I could keep you for days. At home there's a box. If you were under the bed, would you make noises, wet it, move it in the night? I'd be above you, and after the car doors and the bathroom noises and the floorboards, later, I'd hang over to see you down there below, to say hello. We could be together. There could be trouble of course. From the other one, the sister, she might squeal. She's not like Dorothy. Dot and I take the long road home together and if she saw you jump, she'd say 'He's high!' She can howl just like the dogs that come out at night on films I've seen. She's good. Best of all when you're not sure what she'll do. I've had others like you. Once Grandma thought my hedgehog was a brush. She doesn't see very well. They said that with all the crawling things, moving matchboxes, my matchboxes, I was bad for her heart. Grown-ups can be such a long way off, so tall they can't see. But not you. You're all alive and moving. You'll probably move when you're dead.

The first and last pictures show a woman sitting and then lying on a pavement.

She lies on the ground. Perhaps in other places there are those with the privilege of shelter who, in a cautious refined despair, take a bottle to bed, find a hollow in other hills where the eyes of the pavement are easier to bear.

Not like starlight which is often of beauty, not like the headlight that *slows down in recognition, not like the golden lamps which glow with home through the garden of night trees, not like one who shines in the light of somebody else's eye, alone, you are accommodated by a camera which is held in the arms of a stranger, and you turn away, for you know there are days which die willingly.*

It's a tender and vulnerable allegiance we have, I the looker, you the exposed. An association that cannot remain innocent of the crimes of life, of crimes. A love that cannot lie with you but in lying by you cannot lie dormant. There is so much such love cannot do. But it can oppose laws, callous, calculated and protracted which intensify your poverty, castrate your aspirations, compound that fracture of intimacy, from which you will find it hard to rise.

I don't know her name. Asleep, she hears it in her dreams.

Even when empty of most of what you see on closing your eyes, even in those wanton and irreverent things which are dreams, there is a name. A name given only to one when held, plump and proud, to a breast. As close and hot as the space she holds to herself now inside her coat. A name said by another can be sublime. A name said by another can be scathing. And at times a name is a property lost.

On the same pavement a man reads, scrawled in chalk upon the bricks of a wall, the words: TRUE LOVE. Wind blows litter along the pavement. Rain will wash off the chalk. Yet the struggle for meaning which is waged in every soul is immanent in time itself, and in this struggle nothing is repeated. Everything is unique, and, somewhere, is ineradicable. I have no proof of this. It is an article of faith which I think I share with most of the protagonists in this book.

A man walks across a wasteland in biting wind. Behind him is a lorry trailer for hire without a motor. For moving house? How and to where? He advances, driven by his will, head down, carrying what he has gone to fetch.

Once when my aunt was dying, we gathered around her bed. She had ceased to fight. There was and is no possible reason for her to live. To lie in a hospital bed year after year, night after night, to hear others cough and sigh through the dim light.

'Why,' she whispered, 'this time I want to go.'

Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken but I did.

'You're a curious person, Aunty May, you've nowhere to go! Why not stay around out of pure curiosity?'

'Why?' she said.

'Well, Reagan may press the button tomorrow, and you shall have missed it. You will have gone out on a whimper, when you might have gone out on a bang!'

She smiled. 'Trust you!' she said. And she slept.

She's often near death, she's often in despair, but she's remarkable. You wouldn't be aware of courage unless you were aware of her.

The vegetables planted in the soil before the makeshift wind-break on page 32 are, I think, Brussels sprouts. A vegetable which can go on growing when everything else has stopped, in temperatures well below freezing. Sprouts can survive –20° C. Their large, heavily ribbed leaves, like massive hands with fingertips touching, form vaults deep in the snow. These vaults provide air pockets in which small sprouts develop and thrive. Each one has, in addition, its jackets of leaves. The killing cold rarely penetrates more than the first or second layer, beneath which is the green heart. In the winter of this century, children, women and men protect one another with imagination, with violence, with rage, with incomprehension, with ingenuity. The green heart is their capacity to love: their refusal of the principle of indifference.

*

There was once a Saturday, full of Saturday tension, of people with purchases to make and little time to spend, of bought packed lunches from Monday to Friday, of a new pair of shoes for Andrew, of 10p off here compared to 15p there, of paracetamol. In Smith's I picked up a book of old photographs. Photos of the North during another recession in the thirties.

In the inevitable black-and-white clichés there were the inevitable streets, women in large aprons behind greasy machines, scruffy children pulling up socks, smiling people carrying suitcases with straps around them, they were leaving for their one week's unpaid holiday. There were also men, some only smiling, others, marching, listening, standing. The jackets, the shirts, the clothes they wore, nothing corresponded except in that they were the uniform of the waiting. They were crumpled people, their clothes, socks, faces, like springs that had been compressed for too long. Weary of shrinking, of keeping eyes sharp to avoid the blows. Not in retreat. Just tired.

My mother was looking at the book with me. I glanced at her. In her eyes there were tears. There on that busy Saturday, as people pushed by and said 'Sorry' for your toes, as your hip caught against the metal rim of the counter, tears.

'No,' she said, 'it's all been so rotten, all along they've been treated rotten, all along and it's still going on!'

I was her daughter standing beside her and the resemblance wasn't being taken for granted. I was still learning from her, as I'd learnt to brush my teeth, say 'please' and 'thank you' to others. Some true feelings are like my mother's tears in Smith's, extemporary from the Latin – out of time.

1988

Editor's note

The poem by Yeats mentioned on p. 120 is 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' from *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 2nd edition (London: Macmillan 1977), p. 81:

Understanding a Photograph

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Means to Live

Nick Waplington: *Living Room*

What is remarkable about Nick Waplington's photographs [in *Living Room*] is the special way in which they make the intimate something public, something that we, who do not know personally the two families photographed, can look at without any sense (or thrill) of intrusion. Countless photographs violate the intimate simply by placing it in the public context of a book, a newspaper, a TV slot. Yet others – like most wedding photographs – make the intimate formal and thus empty it of its content.

It is obvious that Nick (the photos make me want to call him by his first name), that Nick knows and loves the friends he has photographed. Obvious because of the way they don't look at him. Sometimes, I guess, they were aware that he was taking a picture (yet another one!), but they were aware of it as they might have been aware that he was smiling, and so he was happy and didn't have to be fussed over.

Other times, they forgot about him altogether. He was just there as naturally as if it were Saturday. No work on Saturday, no looking for work. Day off. Day for having fun. Day for watching football results on the TV. Day for letting the parakeets out of their cages during the halftime break. Day when Nick comes around.

It's not so obvious, but if you look carefully, you can tell that Nick took these photos over quite a long period of time. The reddish wall-to-wall carpet was changed in the living room. To the left of the back door in the kitchen of the other house, there used to be a kind of open cupboard made out of bricks: then Jeff changed it and put up a counter where you can sit, even eat if you want.

When you know them intimately, small houses grow up, acquire habits, create surprises, cause worries, change – not as insistently as the children do, but in their own do-it-yourself fashion. Similarly, Nick's photographs are not about captured moments. They are more experiential, constantly evolving over time, commenting on each other, alive. And always there is that thing he has seen, I think, unlike anybody else.

Pleasure. Not pleasure-seekers. Not luxury. Not ecstasy. Not fashion. Not innocence. But the untidy, crowded, noisy, jokey, sad, persistent, working-class pleasure of being at home on Saturday. It's not a pleasure that idealizes, for it's not a pleasure that looks at itself. It accepts sobbing and tiredness and the bills at the end of the month. It wouldn't exist without pats, slaps, tickles, tears, cuddling up, and what the dictionaries call affection, which is really what body offers body for consolation and confirmation with the knowledge – whatever the doctors and the ministers and the Department of Employment say – that eyes are windows on to a soul.

Taken during those years in Britain (as in the US) when the greed of the ruthless class was impoverishing millions of other people's lives – you can read the signs of the consequent impoverishment in this book – these photos are nevertheless not icons of poverty, but, rather, painted cupolas of play.

Make her hair stand up straight with the vacuum cleaner! Feed the lion! Splash! Eat the slipper! Lovey-Dovey! Fly jet! Ice cream. I scream! Lollapaloosa! Cupolas of games. Shared games, which flare, impertinently and gloriously, against the dark. The sacred canoodling pleasure that grows from the flesh of my flesh.

An artist's vision can never be defined just according to what he or she has seen – how he has seen is equally important. Waplington had to discover how to make not records, but images of his chosen subject matter. He had to create images of pleasure to match his subject.

And this is why I think of cupolas. His images are the next-door neighbours to those of baroque ceiling painting – and, in particular, to the work of Peter Paul Rubens. There is an extraordinary affinity of colour, pose, gesture, framing, composition; above all, of the way in which figures relate spatially to one another – look at the three girls and the neighbour in the kitchen, look at the father holding his daughter upside down, or the children on the sofa and the uncle smoking, look at the magic of the vacuum cleaner. I could find bodies of *putti*, men, women, touching, twisting, moving, painted by Peter Paul, to match every one of these. Sometimes they would be almost identical. We could play 'spit' with them all Saturday afternoon.

But it would be only an art-historical game, for the matching is not really important. When Nick took his pictures he wasn't thinking of Peter Paul, and there's little in common between the biographies of the Flemish prince of painting and this kid from Nottingham. The only thing they have in common is a genius for saluting pleasure and a baroque enthusiasm.

I don't know how Nick's notion of using a 6 x 9 camera first came to him. But the baroque was already in this idea. It is a camera designed for panoramic topographical studies. When applied to small interiors and close-up figures, the forms photographed have the space to expand, to become landscapes, or even firmaments. And this is very close to the baroque principle. Baroque wanted to turn the earth-bound into the celestial, and to make human figures appear as at home in the sky as on the ground.

Nick, of course, does not have a sixteenth-century view of the celestial; he has friends in Nottingham. Yet to give expression to the energy of the pleasures of these friends, he needed the visual dynamic of the baroque. And with the help of this camera, he has recycled it.

Any dynamic image begins with what is so dully called composition – how the frame is filled, not just with forms but with movements, and with how these seduce our perception. For example, in the picture of the daughters feeding their father on the kitchen floor: Nick deliberately printed it in reverse (all three appearing left-handed) because like this, the girl on the left takes our hand and leads us with her feet into the picture, as she could never do if she was on the right.

For example, in the flying picture, Nick was lying on the floor because otherwise there would have been no height and the beige ceiling could never have become gold.

For example, in the living room, where the mother is on the sofa and the girl is licking the corner of her mouth; if Nick hadn't put his big feet in it, there'd be no magic circle but just a fragment of a Saturday.

Yet, finally, what is original and moving about Waplington's vision transcends his choice of camera and his skill in composing. I'm talking about his awareness of what is outside the frame. Turning the pages of this book, we also watch the invisible. The paradox of photography is that all great photographers lead us to do this. The invisible has many departments and many moods.

Living Room is in fact a biography of two families in Nottingham. We see them mostly on Saturdays, but we imagine them on every other day of the week; we imagine them in history, which today again tries to treat them like shit; we imagine them all as children; we imagine them all growing old. Each picture holds those whom it shows, as a family name holds for ever the one to whom it has been given. Aunt Elsie is always Aunt Elsie. Dad is always Dad even when he's a granddad. Now we call Mum Mum even when she was a little girl.

The opposite of instant pictures, these photos are as lasting for a lifetime as tattoos, yet all they show are split seconds. This is because, brought there in the concentration of Nick's love, life breathes through every one.

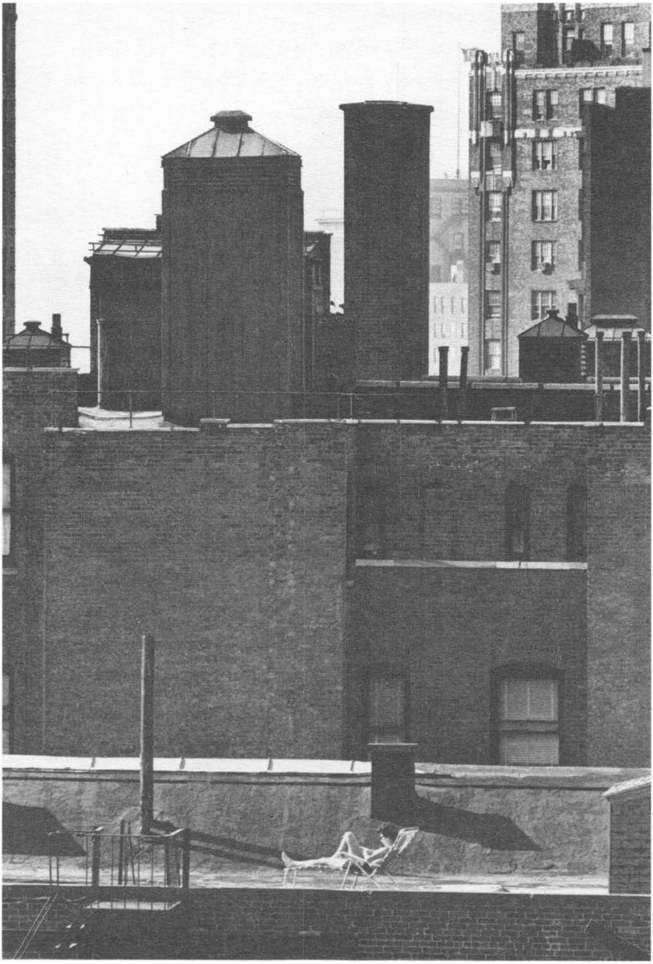
Do you think people'll look at us, Dad? Don't ask me.

Yes, they will. For a very long time. Walt Whitman, who lived before any of us were born, knew why:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are
with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into
a new tongue.
I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.

Here is what it means to live. As I write in the early weeks of 1991, I know that here is what is reduced to dust when bombs are dropped on cities. Be it Nottingham, Baghdad or New York.

1991



André Kertész: *On Reading*

Each of the sixty photographs in Kertész's book *On Reading* is a particular portrait and an interruption of a particular story which we can never know. Fortunately each image is indescribable in words. Appearances have their own language.

Yet, turning the pages of the book and watching image follow image, I learnt something which I had never noticed before and which I think I can describe.

Usually when we read a newspaper or book, we hold it in our hands. Meanwhile what we are reading, whether it is a news item or a poem or a philosophical thesis, takes our attention and a part of our imagination elsewhere.

The child, who reads, runs panting into the next mystery; the old man remembers. But both of them travel.

Even the reading of a simple word like DANGER or EXIT invokes a displacement: at that moment we foresee danger or imagine following the exit sign.

When the words add up to sentences and the sentences fill whole pages and the pages tell a story, the displacement becomes a journey and the pages become a vehicle, a means of transport. Nevertheless, while reading we hold the pages very still. Thus there is a tension between the manual gesture and the travelling. Long before man could fly, this journey was like flying. Those who first read Homer flew to Troy.

Now Kertész, in photo after photo, reminds us of this. We see readers holding on to pages which are taking off into the air or which have just landed from the air.

The double meaning of the word *missile* (signifying both letter and rocket) is revealing. It is no coincidence that among the sixty photographs in the book, no less than twelve show readers on balconies and the roofs of buildings, which are like launch pads.

The same applies, however, to the old woman reading in her four-poster bed or the wardrobe assistant sprawled on a bench or the kids (of whom we only see the knees) reading in a waiting room.

All of them hold the pages as if those pages were only in momentary contact with the ground, as if they were about to defy gravity or had just done so.

The volatile act of reading!

When we ourselves read, we feel this. What I learnt from Kertész's pictures, and what I didn't realize before, is that this can be seen in the gestures and the body of anybody reading. And for this insight we are once again in the Hungarian photographer's debt.

1996

A Man Begging in the Métro

Henri Cartier-Bresson

It's all a question of time, he says.

I watch him. He is eighty-six and he looks much younger, as if he had a special contract with time passing. His eyes are an intense pale blue, and from time to time they twitch, as a dog's muzzle twitches when investigating a scent. It's hard to watch his eyes without feeling you're being indelicate. They're totally exposed – not through innocence, but through an addiction to observation. If eyes are windows on to the soul, his have neither panes nor curtains, and he stands in the window frame and you can't see past his gaze.

Monet and Renoir, he says, painted the view from this window here. They were friends of Victor Chocquet who lived in the flat below.

Chocquet, the man Cézanne painted a portrait of, with a gentle thin face and a beard? I say.

Yes, he says, Cézanne painted several portraits of Chocquet. Here's a reproduction of the Monet of the Palais Royal. You see how the spire there nicks into the dome, closer than a tangent? Now look out of the window. It's the same. He painted from exactly this spot . . . Photography doesn't interest me any more.

If he was an animal, I think he'd be a hare; all the time he's on the point of bounding away. Not in flight. Not in mockery. But casually, for the hell of it. Instead of ears which bring him the news about everything, he has eyes. Amused eyes.

The only thing about photography that interests me, he says, is the aim, the taking aim.

Like a marksman?

Do you know the Zen Buddhist treatise on archery? Georges Braque gave it to me in '43.

I'm afraid not.

It's a state of being, a question of openness, of forgetting yourself.

You don't aim blind?

No, there's the geometry. Change your position by a millimetre and the geometry changes.

What you call geometry is aesthetics?

Not at all. It's like what mathematicians and physicists call elegance, when they're discussing a theory. If an approach is elegant it may be getting near to what's true.

And the geometry?

The geometry comes in because of the Golden Section. But calculation is useless. Like Cézanne said: 'When I start thinking, everything's lost.' What counts in a photo is its plenitude and its simplicity.

I notice the small camera on the table beside him, within easy reach.

I gave up photography twenty years ago, he says, to go back to painting and above all to drawing. Yet people keep on asking me about photography. A while back I was offered an award for my 'creative career as a photographer'. I told them I didn't believe in such a career. Photography is pressing a trigger, bringing your finger down at the right moment.

He imitates the gesture comically in front of his nose. And, as I laugh, I remember the Zen Buddhist tradition of teaching by jokes, of refusing anything ponderous.

Nothing is lost, he says, all that you have ever seen is always with you.

Did you ever want to be a pilot?

Now it's his turn to laugh because I've guessed right.

I was doing my military service in the Air Force, stationed at Le Bourget. Not far away, towards Paris, was the family factory. The well-known Cartier-Bresson reels of cotton! So they knew I was the kid son of a bourgeois. I was put to sweeping out the hangars with a broom. Then I had to fill out a form. Did I want to be an officer? No. Academic achievements? None, I wrote, because I hadn't passed my *baccalauréat*. What were my first impressions of military service? I replied by quoting two lines from Jean Cocteau:

> don't go to so much trouble
> the sky belongs to us all . . .

This, I thought, expressed how I wanted to be a pilot.

I was called before the commanding officer who asked me what the hell I meant. I said I was quoting the poet Jean Cocteau. Cocteau what? he shouted. He went on to warn me that, if I wasn't pretty careful, I'd be drafted to Africa in a disciplinary battalion. As it was, I was put into a punishment squad in Le Bourget.

He has picked up the camera and is looking at me – or, rather, around me, as if I had an aura, as he speaks.

When I was demobilized, I went to the Ivory Coast and earned my living there hunting game. I used to shoot at night with a lamp on my head like a coal miner. There were two of us, and my companion was an African. Then I fell ill with blackwater fever. I'd have certainly died but I was saved by my brother hunter who was skilled, like a medicine man, in the use of herbs. He had already poisoned a white woman because she was too arrogant. Me, he saved. He nursed me back to life . . .

As he tells me this story, it reminds me of other stories I've heard and read about lost travellers being brought back to life by nomads and hunters. When they're brought back, they're not the same. Their sign has been changed by an initiation. The following year, Cartier-Bresson bought his first Leica. Within a decade he was famous.

The geometry, he is now saying, comes from what's there, it's given to one, if one is in a position to see it.

He puts down the camera he was pointing at me without using it.

I want to ask you something, I say, please be patient.

Me? I can't help it. I'm impatient.

The instant of taking a picture, I persist, 'the decisive moment' as you've called it, can't be calculated or predicted or thought about. OK. But it can easily be lost, can't it?

Of course, for ever. He smiles.

So what indicates the decisive split second?

I prefer to talk about drawing. Drawing is a form of meditation. In a drawing you add line to line, bit to bit, but you're never quite sure what the whole is going to be. A drawing is an always unfinished journey towards a whole . . .

All right, I reply, but taking a photograph is the opposite. You feel the moment of a whole when it comes, without even knowing what all the parts are! The question I want to ask is: does this 'feeling' come from a hyper-alertness of all your senses, a kind of sixth sense –

The third eye! He puts in.

– or is it a message from what is in front of you?

He chuckles – like hares do in folk tales – and leaps away to look for something. He comes back holding a photocopy.

Here's my answer – by Einstein.

The quotation has been copied out in his own handwriting. I read the words. They are taken from a letter of Einstein's addressed to the wife of the physicist Max Born in October '44. 'I have such a feeling of solidarity with everything alive that it doesn't seem to me important to know where the individual ends or begins . . .'

That's an answer! I say. Yet I'm thinking about something different. I'm thinking about his handwriting. It's large, easy to read, open, rounded, continuous and surprising.

When you look through the view-finder, he says, whatever you see, you see naked.

His handwriting is surprising because it's maternal, it couldn't be more maternal. Somewhere this virile man who was a hunter, who was co-founder of the most prestigious photo-agency in the world, who escaped three times from a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany, who is a maverick anarchist and Buddhist, somewhere this man's heart is that of a mother.

Check it with his photos, I tell myself. Check it against the men in bowler hats, the abattoir workers, the lovers, the drunks, the refugees, the tarts, the judges, the picnickers, the animals and, on every continent, the kids, above all the kids.

Only a mother can be that unsentimental and love without illusion, I conclude. Maybe his instinct for the decisive moment is like a mother's instinct for her offspring, visceral and immediate. And who really knows whether this is instinct or message?

Of course the heart, maternal or otherwise, doesn't explain everything. There's also the discipline, the persistent training of the eye. He shows me a painting by Louis, his favourite uncle, a professional artist who was killed in Flanders during the First World War, aged twenty-five. We examine other drawings by his father and grandfather. Topographical landscapes of places they found themselves in. A family tradition, passed from generation to generation, of minutely observing branches and patiently drawing leaves. Like embroidery, but with a male, lead pencil.

When he was nineteen, Henri went to study with André Lhote, the Cubist master. And there he learnt about angles, walls and the way things tilt.

Some of the drawings, I say to him, some of your still lifes and Paris street-scenes make me think of Alberto Giacometti. It's not an influence so much as the two of you sharing something. You both share, in your drawings, a way of squeezing between a table and a chair, or between a wall and a car. It's not you physically, of course. It's your vision that slips through to the other side, to the back—

Alberto! he interrupts. Despite all the hell of this life, a man like him makes you realize it's worth being alive. Yes, we slip through . . .

He has picked up his camera and is looking at what is around me again. This time he clicks.

Slipping through, he says. Take coincidences, there's no end to them. Maybe it's thanks to them we glimpse an underlying order . . . The world has become intolerable today, worse than the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century ended in about 1955, I think. Before, there was hope . . .

He has bounded away again to the edge of the field.

We look together at a photo he has just taken of the Abbé Pierre. It's an image which shows the compassion, the fury and the godliness of that remarkable man who fights for the homeless and is the most loved public figure in France. Photographer and priest must be about the same age. A picture of one tireless old man taken by another. And if the Abbé's mother could see Pierre today, she'd see him, I think, as he is at this instant in this photo.

Finally I say I must leave.

People ask me about my new projects, he says, smiling. What shall I say to them? To make love tonight. To do another drawing this afternoon. To be surprised!

I take the lift down from the apartment on the fifth floor and I think he may do another drawing.

In the Métro I find a seat in a coach which is more than half full. At the end of the coach, a man in his early forties makes a short speech about his handicapped wife whom he is leading by the hand and who follows him with her eyes shut. They've been turned out of their lodgings, he says, and they risk being separated if they apply to any institution.

You don't know, the man tells the coach, what it's like loving a handicapped woman – I love her most of the time, I love her at least as much as you love your wives and husbands.

Some passengers give him money. To each one the man says: *Merci pour votre sensibilité.*

At a certain moment during this scene I suddenly glanced towards the door, expecting him to be there with his Leica. This gesture of mine was instantaneous and without reflection.

Photography, he once wrote in his maternal handwriting, is a spontaneous impulse which comes from *perpetually* looking, and which seizes the instant and its eternity.

1996

Martine Franck

Fax Foreword to *One Day to the Next*

Fax: 16.43

03/03/98

Martine,

Why don't we begin at the end? A story becomes a story when its end is known. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden became a story after the Expulsion, not really before. Cinderella has to lose her glass slipper.

Your book – which is haunting because the pages turn as if they made a single story (although in reality you were making many separate reportages) – your book ends with eight photographs taken on Tory Island, out in the Atlantic off the west coast of Donegal in Ireland.

The place is so bare it has no trees. Its extremity is to do with the fact that you can't go any further on land and in this it's like other places along the western coast of Europe – the Hebrides. Land's End. Finistère in Brittany. Finisterre in Galicia. Literally, the end of the earth. Now I want to ask you about landscape. What are the first ones or the most striking ones you remember as a child? Or the most reassuring ones? Where would you like to be buried?

John

Fax: 11.10

05/03/98

John,

I am in the Channel tunnel, precisely in a no man's land: it's like closing my eyes and letting images, words, come up to the surface.

You ask about landscapes. My earliest memories are of the desert: huge fierce cacti erect, rocks, sand, dried-up river beds – almost monochrome apart from the occasional tiny flower that surprises by the intensity of its colour. We had gone to live in Arizona for a few months on account of my brother's asthma. I became acutely aware of this landscape clutching on to a runaway horse. If I had fallen off, it would have been on to rocks or prickly plants. I was lost; I didn't know where I was going; I was prisoner to a bolted horse that wanted to get rid of its mount and go back to its stable. Curiously enough, I associate this terrifying episode with my first lie. The day-school I attended was on the edge of the desert, and every afternoon we would rest on a large wooden balcony overlooking the desert and a plump matron would hand us out a book for our *siesta*. I demanded a book in French; she looked most surprised and asked, 'Can you read French?' 'Yes,' said I haughtily. A little later she caught me out gazing at the book upside down!

I have never really wanted to think about where I am going to be buried, but now you ask me. I think I want to be cremated and my ashes spread under a beautiful tree. I like the idea of being recycled into the earth – but not right away, please!

Martine

Fax: 16.47

06/03/98

Martine,

The runaway horse and the first lie – as you call it. Aren't both of them to do with a jump or a leap ahead? (Later you would read

French, and often kids' fibs are like that – little prophecies, no?) For some reason, the two stories together make me think of your photograph of the little girl in the Pushkin Museum, reading the title of a painting. Another runaway animal in the painting! And this goes further than an anecdotal coincidence, for many, many of your pictures are to do with anticipation or a leap ahead. The old woman in Ivry, joking with you about the picture you are about to take, is using the right tense. *Future immediate.* Can you see what I mean? Of course there are exceptions. But often there's the 'leap' – either physical, like the kids on the wall in Donegal or the juggler in Paris, or else psychic, like the *petits rats* at the opera *waiting* to go on and dance, or like the Tulkus learning to *become* wise.

Not all photos are like this. There's your portrait of Paul Strand. I didn't know you knew him. He was a great tree of a man, wasn't he? His pictures were of the *historic present*, don't you think? Sometimes they were almost like dams to keep the water still. Yours dart forward. Did you always want to be a photographer? Never an acrobat (of some kind)? I keep on coming back to the term anticipation. What children and actors play with continually.

John

Fax: 11.40

07/03/98

John,

No. I never wanted to be an acrobat, but I did enjoy ski racing as an adolescent and, as a child, leaping into the water. My father, among other things, was a distinguished yachtsman and raced in two Olympic Games as captain in the six-metre class. We would spend many a summer and Easter holiday sailing, but I have never conquered my fear of the sea or, should I say, respect for the 'elements' that are so unpredictable. The most recent picture I took for this book, the huge wave crashing on the rocks at Tory, scared the wits out of me; I kept trying to get closer and yet was fearful of the unexpected wave or of slipping on the rocks and breaking a leg or being stranded where no one would have found me. I kept saying to myself, what a stupid way of dying!

My grandfather killed himself falling off the dike in Ostend while photographing my two cousins. This can happen so easily when looking through a lens; for a split second nothing else exists outside the frame, and to get the right frame one is constantly moving forwards, backwards, to the side. A movie-cameraman is often guided, held, when filming; a photographer rarely. This year I am the same age as when my grandfather died.

Photography came as a substitute. I was painfully shy and found talking to people difficult; a camera in hand gave me a function, a reason to be somewhere, a witness but not an actor.

A photograph is not necessarily a lie, but it isn't the truth either. It's more like a fleeting, subjective impression. What I like so much about photography is precisely the moment that cannot be anticipated; one must be constantly on the alert, ready to acclaim the unexpected.

Martine

P.S. I am back in Paris.

Fax: 16.45

07/03/98

Martine,

We're saying the same thing. You: 'One must be constantly on the alert, ready to acclaim the unexpected.' And me with my *future tense* and anticipation. This is something very specific to you. Of many photographers it's not necessarily true. For example, Markéta Luskačová, Edward Weston, Sebastião Salgado, Walker Evans. And Henri Cartier-Bresson is different again. His 'decisive moment' is chosen or seen, as if from the sky, where all time is laid out. But you are waiting for what is going to happen unpredictably. There's something of Tom Sawyer or Huck in you! Look at the Carnival picture in Cologne! Look at the first twelve pictures in the book. Or look – because it's not a question of kids being the subject – look at that marvellous picture of the old women in Cabourg. Look at all three of the women in it considering the baby – an expectancy which is close to devilry. The girl on Tory with the doll is a self-portrait! Admit it. (Have you ever taken a self-portrait? Fax me one, if you have.) Lili Brik is planning mischief. And the fabulous composition shows her already halfway there!

Does one get less shy with age? Shyness is a strange thing. It's not quite the same as being timid. Because there's an element of curiosity in shyness, no? It's to do with *daring*. That's the paradox. It's the adventurous who are shy.

Perhaps fear is never conquered. But an antidote to fear (contrary to what people imagine) is speed. You sailing. You on your skis. Me on my motorbike. Maybe it's an atavism of the nervous system. Fear meant running! What allows an image to suggest speed is pretty mysterious. For instance, for me your very still picture of two gulls on a cliff face on Tory; and, equally, the following photograph of the nude couple on the beach. What speed!

And with speed we're again talking about anticipation and readiness.

How did the theme of the monks come about? Was it like any other project for you, or was it special?

John

Fax: 10.05

08/03/98

John,

Yet another coincidence: you ask me about the little monks and today I shall be photographing the demonstration to commemorate the Tibetan uprising against the Chinese (10 March 1959). I remember, years ago, you mentioned Susan Meiselas as being a Shakespearian messenger for the resistance in Latin America and now for the Kurds. I would like to think of myself as adding a grain of sand in favour of the Tibetan cause. How can you show the Tibetans' plight without referring to Buddhism – their whole culture is linked, and these young lamas I have been photographing over the past few years will one day become the spiritual leaders of the Tibetans (hopefully, not only those in exile). Like our Middle Ages, it is in the monasteries that their culture is preserved and transmitted. Their life is somewhat similar to an English boarding school, without the competitive emphasis on sports; it is Spartan, disciplined, they wear a 'uniform' and are educated to become an elite, but with a lot more affection bestowed upon them than in England. Monks can be very motherly. My mother gave me Mark Twain to read as a child, also Conan Doyle; Sherlock Holmes and Hitchcock are still a passion of mine. And that brings us back to the mystery of life, the unexpected side of reality that is constantly taking us by surprise, off our guard. I think, basically, that is why I never get bored photographing.

You have been asking all the questions. May I ask one? Are you happy?

Martine

Fax: 15.34

11/03/98

Martine,

Am I happy? I don't really believe that happiness is a *state*. Unhappiness can be but happiness is, by its nature, a moment. The moment may last a few seconds, a minute, an hour, a day and a night, but I don't think it can ever last *as such* for as long as a week. Unhappiness is often like a long novel. Happiness is far more like a photo! And it's closely connected with what you say: the sense of marvelling.

I think the second half of my life has been happier than the first – there have been more such moments. Maybe when they were rarer, they were more intense. (Memory plays as many tricks as photography.) I'm not sure. I have the impression that, when I was young, the moments of happiness were pushed close to the point of pain, whereas now they are like a place of shelter.

Is this old age, or the times we live in? Happiness changes its character, too, in the Dark Ages. In our Dark Age. I'm happy to be able, at certain moments, to marvel. Like at your tree in Djibouti!

I want to quote (another way of answering your question) some lines from the Argentinian poet – ah! you should make a portrait of him! He lives in Mexico – Juan Gelman.

The Deluded

hope fails us often
grief, never.
that's why some think
that known grief is better
than unknown grief.
they believe that hope is illusion.
they are deluded by grief.

It's snowing this afternoon. I see you with snow on your shoulders. Where are you?

John

Fax: 21.58

14/03/98

John,

I was in Barcelona participating in an exhibition organized by 'les petits frères des Pauvres' [the Little Brothers of the Poor]. I did a book many years ago on their relationship to old people; some of my photos were on show and there was also a group exhibition on the theme of 'poverty and exclusion'. The setting was surreal – a magnificent medieval palace next to the Cathedral with Gothic paintings of saints and martyrs on the walls, sculptures of *Mater Dolorosas* and, mingled in between, photographs of the 'martyrs' of today: the poor, the excluded, the junkies, the Aids victims. I wonder if the public will see the irony of it all.

Barcelona is a photographer's paradise; the streets are so lively and you can get lost in the old city, which hasn't been restored or spoilt by the tourists. The Catalan museum of Romanesque frescoes is mind-boggling. These painters were such great portraitists, earlier than Giotto, and we don't even know their names.

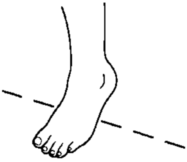
Martine

Fax: 11.20

16/03/98

Martine,

Last night, while thinking about what makes a picture by you visibly *yours*, I had a little vision.



Does this drawing make any sense to you? Do you see what it refers to?

John

Fax: 13.56

16/03/98

John,

Your drawing makes me think of someone tripping gently along the path – tiptoeing so as not to be seen or heard.

In fact, I am always fearful of stubbing my toes, even in summer. I rarely walk barefoot or wear sandals, especially when photographing. 'Sensible shoes' are what allows a photographer to be agile.

Martine

Fax: 16.31

16/03/98

Martine,

The drawing was not meant to show someone gently tripping along a path, though this is surely what it looks like – bad drawing! It was meant to show a foot crossing a line – a broken line, maybe – crossing a kind of frontier.

In picture after picture by you I have this sense of a frontier – the frontier of a moment – as in the photo of the Tulku with the pigeon on the monk's head; a frontier of experience, as in the portrait of Chagall; a frontier of comprehension, as in the study of Mnouchkine imagining a midsummer night's dream; the frontier of a continent, as in several of the pictures of Donegal. Always this stepping over, or this about-to-be-stepping over, a line of demarcation . . .

On the other side it's not the same. Yes, I think it's with that sentence that I would sum up the intimation I have before this collection of your work.

John

Fax: 19.14

16/03/98

John,

Your words evoke so many images to me, but I am not sure they are the same for us both. You say: 'On the other side it's not the same.' On the other side of what? The camera?

The camera is in itself a frontier, a barrier of sorts that one is constantly breaking down so as to get closer to the subject. In doing so, you step over limits; there is a sense of daring, of going beyond, of being rude, of wanting to be invisible.

To cross on to the other side, you can only get there by momentarily forgetting yourself, by being receptive to others: hence, as a photographer, I am in two different worlds at once. That is all I can really say about what I feel when photographing – the rest remains in the domain of the unconscious.

Transgression is the word I have been searching for all along.

Martine

Martine Franck

Fax: 22.15

16/03/98

Martine,

Yes, *transgression.*

Its first meaning, of passing a legal limit, is important. There's a subversive tendency in most of the photography you and I admire. (Although, God knows, photographs are also used a million times a week across the world today to pander to the new world order, which at the moment is that of the Free Market and Neo-liberalism.)

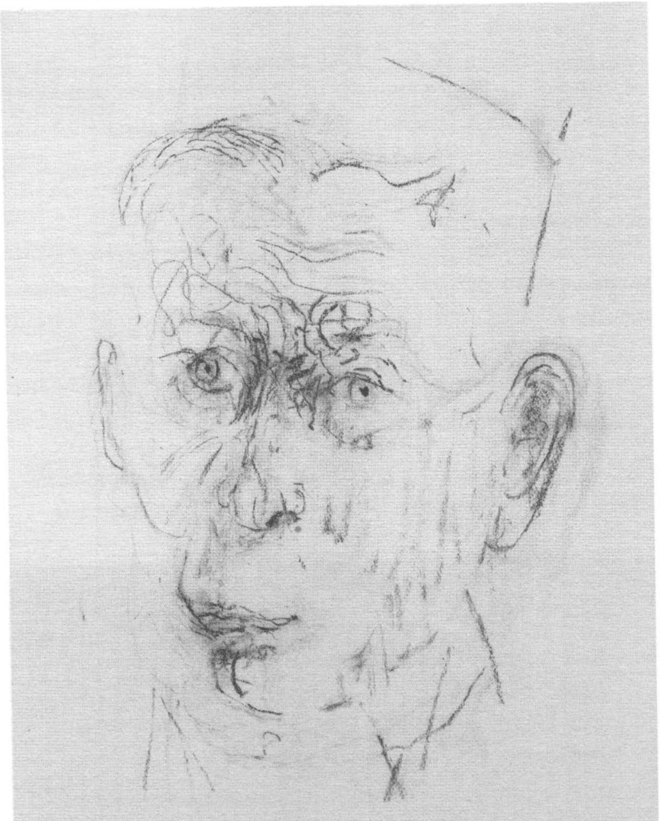
There is also the other, geological, meaning of the word transgression. This refers to the way one geological stratum uncomfortably overlaps another – particularly when the movement of the sea is involved. So we are back at Land's End, at Finistère, at a demarcation line which offers *perches* from which one can dive into the unknown!

John

1998

Editor's note

Juan Gelman's 'The Deluded', quoted on p. 153, is taken from *Unthinkable Tenderness: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Joan Lindgren (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 167.



Jean Mohr: A Sketch for a Portrait

Over the thirty-five years of our friendship, Jean has taken many photographs of me. Sometimes people who don't know me well propose that I write an autobiography. It's hard to explain to somebody who doesn't see it, why storytellers, as distinct from novelists, aren't very interested in autobiography. And anyway the story exists, written in the laughs, the gestures, the wrinkles, the lines, the fatigue, the smiles, the grimaces, the fury, to be found in the countless pictures which Jean has taken of me and which now fill how many yellow boxes? Many of course were taken without my realizing it, for I have become so used to seeing Jean holding up a camera before his broken nose that I no longer ask what he's looking at.

A few weeks ago, I decided to turn the tables on him. Will you pose for me? I asked. Can I bring my camera? Of course, I said.

And so Jean came and posed for several hours while I tried to draw him. I had drawn him once before – about five years ago – but I had forgotten that drawing and I didn't want to look at it again for the moment.

In the studio we listened to music (Jean shared with his father a love of Mahler, Schubert, Berg) and when the music stopped, we talked about how it felt to be seventy years old, and we remembered old friends, some of them lost, and we named old loves, and all the time, throughout the music or the talk or the silences, I was trying to read the face of this man, with whom I had learnt so much, and with whom I had been to many places for the first time.

I was drawing with charcoal on large sheets of Ingres paper, about life-size. I did three drawings, all of them bad, but becoming perhaps a little less bad. At the beginning all you can do is to make a clumsy map of the face. Three and a half maps.

Finally it was time for him to leave. He settled into his driving seat, raised two fingers of his left hand like a pilot before taxiing to the runway, and said: It was good to be together. Then he drove off.

I went back, took another sheet of paper and sat there, huddled over the drawing board. Naturally I was no longer looking at Jean, for he was no longer there. I was studying the maps on the floor and trying to forget.

When you're trying to make a portrait of somebody you know well, you have to forget and forget until what you see astonishes you. Indeed, at the heart of any portrait which is alive, there is registered an absolute surprise surrounded by close intimacy. I'll certainly be misunderstood but I'll take the risk and say: to make a portrait is like fucking.

After many re-beginnings, a drawing emerged. In it I see a dog and a boy, and both are contained in the face of a man of my age. In the look of neither of them is there anything in the least naïve. (If it's naïveté you're after, you should concentrate on Successful Men.) What is here which might be mistaken for naïveté by the naïve – is the habit of being startled, for to both dog and boy the world is startling. Often alarmingly, and occasionally miraculously, the world is continually startling. The photos Jean has taken all his life are the product of an alertness which comes from being startled.

I have often seen Jean with dogs, but rarely in the role of the dog's master. If he raises his voice and says words curtly, the dog obeys him, no doubt. But this is unusual. More often he is making dog noises with the dog and, far from being masterly and upright, is somehow doubled up and as close to the ground as the animal. One of his books is entitled *A Dog and His Photographer*. The dog in question was called Amir and was a Persian Saluki.

I have other memories of Jean sitting with guests at a formal dinner table, or drinking coffee in a drawing room, and, without warning, because he has spotted a cat or maybe a stranger's dog through the window – he starts, without the slightest warning, to make animal or bird noises himself. His face absolutely impassive, his mouth slightly pursed yet quite still, the focus of his very pale blue eyes very far away, almost at the world's end. If there are children present, they are delighted and adopt him immediately. The adults look uncomfortable.

In the rest of his life Jean is more than usually formal. You feel the example of his father, a highly cultivated German scholar who, because he was uncompromisingly anti-Nazi, left Germany to settle in Switzerland in the late 1930s.

I knew Jean's mother and I've seen some of his father's library, but his father had already died when Jean and I first met. Nevertheless I have a vivid image of his father. Perhaps because Jean admired him very much. I see the way he holds himself very upright and a little stooped. I see his blue eyes half shut against the light, and I hear his modulated, calm voice.

I guess that of the six children it is Jean who resembles his father the most. Jean, however, has lived more precariously than his father did. Precariously, in this context, refers to time: his father thought and felt in terms of decades or half-centuries. Jean thinks and feels in minutes or split seconds. This historical difference was encapsulated in Jean's eventual decision to become a photographer.

He might also have been a pilot. If I had to name a writer to accompany Jean in a double portrait of two men, it would be Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. (I say this, although I'm not sure that we have ever discussed the writer, and I can guess that Jean would be sceptical about the myth surrounding the man.) Yet I see both of them as discreet, eccentric travellers, loving people and loving distances even more.

Every large family in the Alpine village where I live has its own collection of Mohr photos. Sometimes there's one framed on the mantelpiece; others are in a box which is brought out when people start to reminisce. Frequently they are photos which they have asked him to take at a wedding, a village gathering, a dance.

Today, all the young in the village have colour films and cameras and videos. But when Jean first started coming to visit, pictures were still rare and a photographer was thought of as some kind of inspector, or obscure state spy.

If they quickly accepted Jean, and then invited him to take pictures (in exchange for bottles of illicit *eau de vie*), it was because this man who came from the ends of the world, this man with a black bag always slung over his shoulder and a slightly foreign accent and a curious love of mountains (shepherds can understand such a love better than peasants), this man, unlike an inspector, was clearly and startlingly observant all the while, as they themselves had to be because they lived unprotected lives and it is therefore necessary to observe everything. And then, later, they found that the photos he took and gave them were a kind of company – like the melodies of tunes they knew and might sing when together. The photos became in black and white the incarnations of certain names: Théophile, Marius, Jeanne, César, Angeline, Marie, Basil.

The other night I had a dream about Jean. We were in a car together and he was driving. As one might expect of an airline pilot, he drives decisively and very well. At a certain moment he braked and we stopped on a deserted road, a mountain landscape around us.

'Il faut tirer les photos,' he said. In French *tirer les photos* means develop the photos, but, literally, it can also mean pull out the photos. We opened both doors of the car and he, having stepped outside, pulled out from under the bonnet three large photographs which were masked with adhesive paper. All three were rectangular and one of them was long and narrow. As soon as I saw them, I realized that the long one had the same dimensions as the windscreen, and the other two were the size of the side windows of the car.

Carefully and slowly, I pulled off their adhesive covering. Underneath were three landscapes. I cannot really describe them, but they were beautiful and, although the photos were black and white, I knew that they would change colour when the sun went down – in the same way as the white mountain snow does. In each picture one could see something which was partly hidden under a kind of geological cornice, like somebody sheltering under the eaves of a roof.

I fixed the three photos to the windscreen and the two windows. As I had foreseen, they fitted perfectly. We shut the doors, and Jean drove off. He drove with the same decisiveness as before. I did not know whether he was driving blind or with a kind of clairvoyance. But I was filled with a sense of well-being and assurance. Then I woke up.

Even among his confrères, Jean is a widely travelled photographer. He has been to many countries in the five continents, many corners of the world. Not, first of all, to take photographs but to notice. His pictures never suggest that he was searching, rather they suggest that he happened to be passing by. There is something strangely casual, offhand, about his images. A kind of nonchalance. Yet a caring nonchalance. And this is precisely why one believes in the special authenticity of his photos.

Both Jean and I have a considerable admiration for Eugene Smith. He, however, when he set out on a reportage, was intent on finding what he was looking for, and in one way or another, he was usually looking for the same thing – a Pietà. Edward Weston was looking for a manifestation of harmony; Walker Evans for qualities of endurance. Jean, I believe, looks for nothing. What he finds is what he happens to come upon. And not infrequently this involves somebody else looking at him!

This casualness, however, has nothing whatsoever to do with indifference; it is a simple precondition for being open to surprise. In principle nothing surprises Jean Mohr – he has seen and observed so much; in practice almost everything he notices surprises him because, in its minute or overwhelming way, it is unique.

Here we are at the secret of the best travellers' tales: a whispering between the familiar and the outlandish, between the banal and the unknowable, between routine and fatality. Jean's tales spare nothing and nobody and they never judge: they often make the heart bleed and they don't exaggerate.

I'm of course generalizing about a life's work. Jean has more than half a million photographs in his archives and I'm trying to define the quality which makes them unmistakably his. I'm not claiming that if I was shown any one of these images I would immediately recognize it as his. But if I was shown a dozen, I think I would immediately say: Jean! and I would recognize them by their specific quality of surprise, a spontaneous surprise, never one which has been sought for.

The way Jean became a photographer may help to explain this. Like Cartier-Bresson and like Salgado, Jean became a photographer by default. He did not set out to spend his life taking pictures with a camera.

At the University of Geneva he studied economics and fantasized about becoming a painter. He then volunteered, in 1949, to be sent as a delegate for the International Red Cross to take care of Palestinian refugees on the West Bank and in Jordan. (Thirty years later he would make a whole book about the Palestinian struggle and tragedy with Edward Said, *After the Last Sky*.) While there on the Red Cross mission, he had the chance of buying an East German camera. He bought it to give as a present to one of his brothers. Then, unexpectedly, he started using it himself. He began to take pictures so as not to forget the unpredictable and incongruous details – often painful, sometimes desperate, occasionally illuminated – concerning the lives he was witnessing.

He returned to Europe in 1951 and settled in Paris to study painting. There he showed his Palestinian photographs to painter friends, and they told him that they were surprising!

He decided to try portraits. First, however, before taking out his camera, he would sit down to draw his sitters and they for their part were a little nonplussed. They glanced at the drawings and asked: What on earth are you doing? You are meant to be a photographer, aren't you?

Consequently, bit by bit, Jean's eyes became accustomed to black and white, to split seconds, to the darkroom. A habit of looking-around-all-the-while, an habitual alertness, started to develop. And a demon was born.

In 1955, to earn money, he agreed to work with a couple of acquaintances who had thought up a scheme of taking aerial photographs in the countryside and then selling prints to the farmers and proprietors of the land photographed. Black and white, later hand-coloured by a girlfriend. Jean in the little monoplane worked fast and under cramped conditions, but the business never got going and the money ran out. Instead of being paid for the work he had done, he was given an enlarger and two Leicas. This is how he set up as a professional.

He began working from Geneva for different branches of the United Nations – and in particular for the World Health Organization and the High Commission for Refugees. His job was to make pictures about their ongoing international projects and programmes. He was never a press or war photographer, although often his pictures, supplied by the UN, were used in newspapers.

This special freelance status – and it continued for over twenty-five years – allowed him to work in his own way. He was continually going to faraway places and his travelling was paid for. Further, when he was on a mission, he was not under the time pressure which most press photographers have to work with; his trips were relatively unhurried.

Consequently, apart from the reportage he delivered to the organization which had sent him, he was able to take tens of thousands of pictures for himself. These pictures were purposeless – in the sense that they were not taken to prove or demonstrate a preconceived idea. They were offhand, casual, maverick, personal records of moments which astonished or startled him.

Jean's work is deeply committed to what happens, and at the same time it shows an *elsewhere*. Even when the subject is familiar to a spectator, the image will still communicate a kind of surprise. And this is the more striking because his photographs refuse formal tricks.

Finally, their surprise derives from the quality of their observation: the startled observation of a boy and dog who have accompanied a highly experienced and intrepid traveller.

With Jean – as with most true artists – the relationship between modesty and pride is a complex one. Or maybe it's simpler than I think. He is modesty itself with those who are modest. And he is as recalcitrant as hell with those who are arrogant. What he and I both share is nevertheless a sense of measure. This helps to explain how we have been able to collaborate over many years – and why our collaboration has been productive. Less modest than he, I will say that with the example of three books, *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man* and *Another Way of Telling*, we have considerably extended the narrative dialogues possible in book form between text and images.

We started from what Walker Evans and James Agee achieved in their magnificent *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Exactly where we ended, it is for others to judge, but we covered a lot of ground and have already had a considerable influence on the way other photographers and writers across the world have made books.

So we share a sense of measure. Where mine comes from, I don't know. Perhaps Jean does. Maybe it comes from the process of correcting and correcting again the exaggerations with which I usually begin a project or a vision. It's what comes after a kind of recklessness.

Jean's sense of measure comes from something different. His acquired stance towards life – coming perhaps from his father – is classical. He is clearly aware of the dangers of excess. And yet, inside him, are the dog and the boy. Maybe it's exactly for this contradiction that I love him. In any case it's from the pain of this contradiction that his stoicism is born and it's from his stoicism that comes his sense of measure.

We have needed a shared sense of measure in order to create pages which flow. A book has to advance on two legs, one being the images, the second the text. Both have to adapt to the pace of the other. Both have to refrain from repeating what the other has already done. What so often checks any flow, when images and text are used together, is tautology, the deadening repetition of the same thing being said twice, once with words and once with a picture.

To avoid this and to walk together in step with the story, a sense of measure is essential. Perhaps this is true – at another level – for all long-standing (long-walking?) friendships.

The Edge of the World. I've tried to suggest why such a location, such an *elsewhere*, is intrinsic to Jean's vision and *oeuvre*. I could put it differently: Jean is always on foreign soil, or Jean is always the stranger. Yet, like all nomads, he knows how the guest behaves and how the host receives. And the paradox is that it's there on the Edge of the World that he is at home, as both host and guest. And it is there that I had the privilege and luck of his offering me his friendship.

1999

Editor's note

'The Edge of the World' is what the mountains near Geneva are known as locally, and it was here that Mohr was recovering from a serious operation in 1996.

A Tragedy the Size of the Planet

Conversation with Sebastião Salgado

Sebastião Salgado. Nationality: Brazilian. His look suggests that if he had been born in another century he would have been a navigator, an explorer. Profession today: photographer. He was trained as an economist, and one day he asked himself whether pictures might not reveal as much or more than statistics.

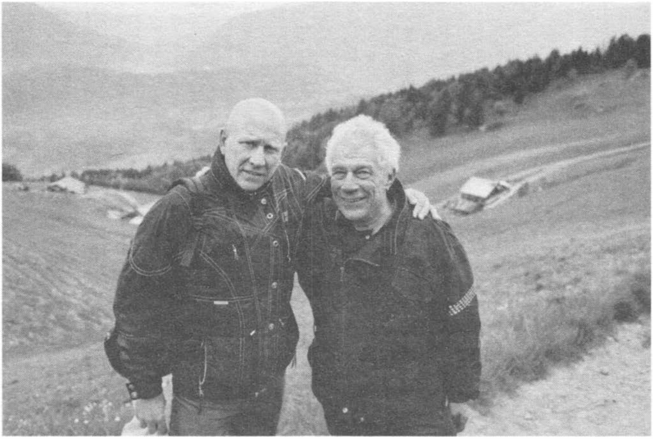
John Berger. Nationality: British. Profession: writer. Trained as a painter. I try to put into words what I see.

It was in my kitchen that the two of us met to talk about Salgado's latest book *Migrations*. He travelled for six years, visiting forty-three countries. Everywhere he went he found people on the move, looking for somewhere, some way, to earn their living and feed their children. During those six years, the economist – who became a photographer – took pictures of the face of globalization.

After talking we went for a walk and an alpinist coming down the local mountain noticed that Salgado was carrying a camera. 'Would you like me to take a picture of you both?' he asked us.

What follows are passages, unlaundered, from this conversation.

*



SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

I saw sometimes die per day 10,000 people. It's very hard, it's very hard to see 10,000 people die, and 10,000 people with good health, they were not starving, they were dying because we had not any way to save them.

This happens in many different places today, and I ask myself the question if there is not a correlation between the number of televisions produced in some factories, the number of cars produced, the number of profits the banks make, with the number of people who die in this moment like this . . . This story, this book, these pictures is a globalization picture, these are the globalized people.

JOHN BERGER:

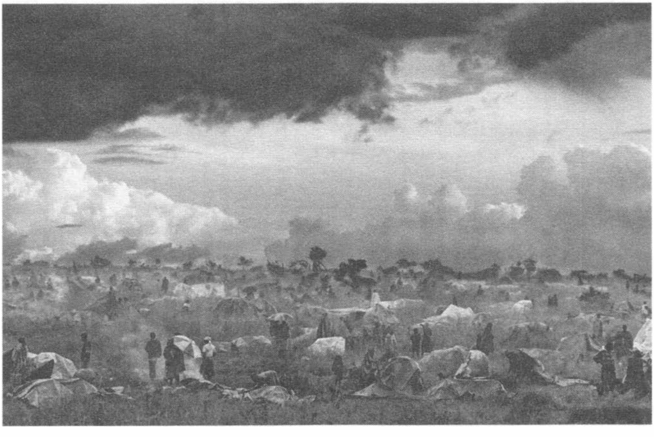
Globalization means many things. At one level, it talks of trade, which since the sixteenth century has exchanged goods and now, increasingly, ideas and information across the globe. But also globalization is a view of the world, it is an opinion about man and why men are in the world.

One in five of all the people on the globe benefit from this system. Four in five suffer in different degrees from the new unnecessary poverty.

Part of the fanaticism of the economic system which we now call globalization, part of its bigotry, as always occurs with bigotry, is that it pretends – and it is a lie – it pretends that no alternative is possible. And it's simply not true, and it is said in the face of the whole of human history.

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

This phenomenon in Africa to have more and more refugees, more and more disintegration of countries, has to do with this new economic system and what they receive against their production, the goods that they produce. The price of these products is not fixed in the Ivory Coast, is not fixed in Liberia, is not fixed in Brazil, *is* fixed in London, *is* fixed in New York by trading companies, and they don't take into consideration the needs of the life of this population. And what happens? The cake is each time smaller for a population that is each time bigger.



The problem is an economical problem in the start of all these stories.

I know these people from Rwanda from long ago. I came to Rwanda the first time, 1971, as an economist. I came to work in the tea plantations, and the tea plantations had a very equilibrated way of life. Rwanda was not an underdeveloped country, was not a poor country, was a developing country. When I came back to this tea plantation recently, all was burnt, all was destroyed. All the effort that all these people made was lost. These people were in the road, in the death. And up to this moment, until the days I took these pictures, I was sure that evolution was positive. After this I ask myself the question: what is evolution? Evolution can be towards anything, it can be in any direction, we can evolve negatively, going to the death, going to the final point, going to the most brutal end, and we adapt to it also.

JOHN BERGER:

In a strange way, in all these pictures, one feels in your vision the word 'Yes', not that you approve of what you see, but that you say 'Yes' because it exists. Of course you hope that this 'Yes' will provoke in people who look at the pictures a 'No', but this 'No' can only come after one has said, 'I have to live with this.' And to live with this world is first of all to take it in. The opposite of living with this world is indifference, is a turning away.

The point about hope is that hope is something which occurs in very dark moments, it is like a flame in the darkness, it isn't like a confidence and a promise.

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

As you say, there is for me a lot of hope here. All the migrants I photographed once lived in a stable way. Now they suffer transition, and what they have with them is just a small slice of hope. And it is with this hope that they are trying to get another stable position in life.

If the person looking at these pictures only feels compassion, I will believe that I have failed completely. I want people to understand that we can have a solution. Very few of the persons photographed are responsible for the situation that they are now in. Most of them don't understand why they are in the road with thousands of others. They lost their house at the end of the last brick, because they were bombed, fired, destroyed, and they are in the road and they don't understand why. They are not the reason for their being there; it is other things. And about these other things we have to choose.

JOHN BERGER:

If you added up all the time of the instants in this book . . .

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

Probably here we have altogether one second! And this for me is the magic of this kind of photography because in this one second I believe you can understand very well what is going on in the planet today.

JOHN BERGER:

This photo?

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

This man, he was a teacher and he was completely, completely in despair, and nobody else was there to understand him. Only his community was there to understand what they had lost.

JOHN BERGER:

Which makes me think of the French philosopher Simone Weil and something she wrote in the forties. It's a kind of a summing up, I think, of what you were saying: 'There are only two services which images can offer the afflicted. One is to find the story which expresses the truth of their affliction. The second is to find the words which can give resonance, through the crust of external circumstances, to the cry which is always inaudible: "Why am I being hurt?"'

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

We speak a lot about statistics; we don't speak about real feeling. I came one year ago to Kosovo and I was reminded exactly of this. During this war we were given a lot of statistical information, information about the number of bombers that had been bombing Kosovo, the number of pilots that were used to attack Serbia, but nobody spoke about real people, about the suffering of those living it.

Crossing the border from Kosovo to Albania, the refugees were expecting people to receive them with open arms, to bring them to their countries, to bring them to France, to bring them to Germany, to the United States. And they were wrong, nobody was waiting for them. We made a big war, we expended billions of dollars in their name and we made nothing for them.

JOHN BERGER:

If we accept what is happening in pictures like these, we are face to face with the tragic. And what happens in face of the tragic is that people have to accept it and cry out against it. Although it won't change anything. And they cry out, very frequently, to the sky. In many of your pictures the sky is very important. Spectators who have lost any sense of tragedy look at these skies and say, 'Ha. What a beautiful set, what a beautiful decor, what a well-chosen moment.' But it isn't a question of aesthetics. The sky is the only thing that can be appealed to in certain circumstances. Who listens to them in the sky? Perhaps God. Perhaps the dead. Perhaps even history.

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

They are living their lives inside a tragedy the size of the planet.

People come to you, to your lens, as they would come to speak in a microphone. You assume a big responsibility then, you have to tell their stories; this means you must show their pictures. I don't want to create a bad conscience in those who look at them, because the majority of the people who look at them have a proper house, they have work, they have health. And it is correct that they have these things. What needs to be different is that all the planet has these things.

JOHN BERGER:

How did these portraits of children come about?

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

I was working in Mozambique, in a camp, a big camp of displaced population. Most of them were children because in Mozambique there were about 350,000 children who had lost their families. These children were making a big fuss to be in the pictures, because that is the way of children to be in the picture, it's natural, it's normal. And I had an idea. I said, 'Guys, I do a picture of each one of you, and after that you behave normally, and let me work.'

The moment these children stepped out of their group to sit in front of the lens, they become individuals. Individuals. They were innocent, they were pure, but from their eyes it was possible to see what they had lived, what was their life.

JOHN BERGER:

They stood there presenting themselves: 'I, I'm here, this is me.'

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

'I exist.'

JOHN BERGER:

Something else is happening, isn't it? Because they are looking at the camera, they know that they are looking at the world. And so they address a question to the world: 'What are you, you out there?' Or: 'Is there anything else out there?'

Following their questions, we could ask ourselves three questions.

1. The priorities according to which we perceive and react to the world might be changeable?

2. Those kids, the true spectres of hope, look at us from the five continents – embodying whose hope?
3. Who needs who the most, they us or we them?

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:

Probably to do a film is a wrong way. Probably to do a show of posters is not correct. But I sincerely want to know what is correct. Because, if it is correct, I believe that I must go and do it. I believe we have a responsibility in the time we are living to provoke a discussion, to provoke a debate, to ask questions. A debate everybody should participate in and have a responsibility for. If we want to survive as a species we must find a proper direction to go, we must choose another way. Because what I saw in these pictures is not the proper way. This is not the correct way the one we have chosen.

2001

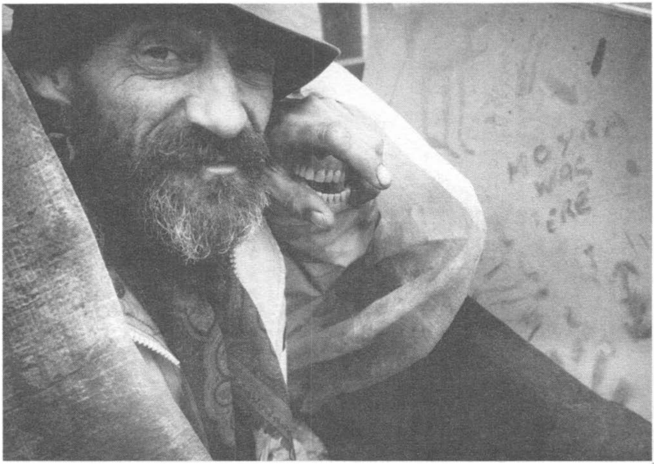
Recognition

Moyra Peralta: *Nearly Invisible*

To know a person you have to be known by that person. Between people there is no such thing as unilateral one-way knowledge. Moyra Peralta knows the people she photographs. We, who look at her photographs, are witnessing an exchange. We overhear, with our eyes, two or more voices talking to one another. And the voices have allowed us to be there. Make yourself at home, the voices suggest. And this is startling, even disturbing, because the photographs are of the homeless.

The photographs are close-ups not in the photographic but in the human sense of the term. Yet the men and women who are their subjects are normally in everyday life ignored, or passed over, as if they were not visible, not there. When we encounter one of them in the street, we tend to look away. In certain cities the authorities of so-called law and order forbid the homeless access to the most frequented parts of the city. Turning the pages of *Nearly Invisible* we come upon close-ups of the excluded, of those who suffer from being treated as if they ought to be invisible.

A few years ago I was writing a story about the homeless. In it a sixty-year-old man talks to his dog about one of the reasons for this aspect of their exclusion: the need of the rest of society not to see them.



> We are being wiped off the earth, not the face of the earth, the face we lost long ago, the arse of the earth. Because we are their mistake, King. And a mistake is hated more than an enemy. Mistakes don't surrender as enemies do. There's no such thing as a defeated mistake. Mistakes either exist or they don't, and if they do exist, they have to be covered over, they have to be made invisible. We are their mistake, King.

The poverty recorded in this book is a new poverty, such as did not exist before. Dying from the cold at night, having hunger pains in the guts, drinking anything alcoholic to numb the mind – this is the same whatever the kind of poverty. Nevertheless, the context in which the poverty occurs is important and may contribute to the pain involved.

Until the middle of the twentieth century poverty, on a world scale, was linked with scarcity; today the new poverty's linked with overproduction and ever-increasing consumerism. Four-fifths of the world's population's growing poorer every year, and the gap between rich and poor is wider than it has ever been in history. The marginalized men and women in the close-ups of this book represent, in this comparative sense, the global majority. Once fallen into – or born into – the new poverty is limitless.

Why? The new economic order, based upon the free market and the pursuit of ever-increasing profits (for otherwise the system collapses), is maintained, managed and directed by an international elite who have untiring energy (until they are burnt out) and no vision of the future at all. They live from hour to hour, day to day. Their absolute maximum future projection – always tentative – might be five years.

The barbarism we have entered – and maybe in this it resembles all barbarisms – takes account of only the short term, only the immediate gain (or loss), only the present advantage here and now. (Never have the generations to come been less considered.) Nothing else and nothing more counts than the immediate.

The homeless have been turned out and are obliged to live as best they can in the streets, because the single world economy – with its unsurpassed productivity and turnover – is, for the moment, being operated by marketeers who calculate (and speculate) with the time perspective of a destitute: a destitute desperately asking her- or himself: how will I get by until the day after tomorrow?

This brutal and monstrous paradox requires thinking about.

Return to Moyra Peralta's photographs, taken over a decade, of some of the people she knows. None of them can be reduced to an argument – even a passionate argument – against the new world economic order. Each person she photographs is unique, each one has her or his own world, which they struggle every hour to somehow preserve.

The close-up is the opposite of a statistic. The love which the photographer has for her subjects is the opposite of philanthropy.

There are impulses deeper than generosity. What first matters is recognition. Recognition. The word appears to make no claim and to sound poor. Yet that perhaps is how it should be.

I know of nobody who has understood half as much about recognition as the philosopher Simone Weil (1909–43). What she wrote could only have been written in the twentieth century with its climax of intolerable human contrasts.

> There is a natural alliance between truth and affliction, because both of them are mute suppliants, eternally condemned to stand speechless in our presence.
>
> Just as a vagrant accused of stealing a carrot from a field stands before a comfortably seated judge who keeps up an elegant flow of queries, comments and witticisms while the accused is unable to stammer a word, so truth stands before an intelligence which is concerned with the elegant manipulation of opinions.

> To love one's neighbour is a question of being able to ask simply: what is your torment? Of knowing that affliction exists, not as a statistic, not as an example from a social category labelled 'underprivileged', but as something which happens to a human being, exactly comparable with us, who one day was struck and marked down with a mark that is like no other, by affliction. And to know this it is sufficient – but indispensable – to be able to look at this person with recognition and attention.

Following the example of Moyra Peralta, let us look at the close-ups to come with attention. They will then surprise us with their resilience, their wit, their indomitability and their despair.

2001

Editor's note

The first quotation on p. 180 is from 'Human Personality' in *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (London: Virago, 1986); the second is from 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God' in Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Fontana, 1983).

Tribute to Cartier-Bresson

At every railway crossing in France there is a solid notice, a panel with writing on it which reads: 'Attention! Un train peut en cacher un autre.' Cartier-Bresson, whatever the event he was photographing, saw the second train and was usually able to include it within his frame. I don't think he did this consciously, it was a gift which came to him, and he felt in the depths of his being that gifts should continually be passed on. He photographed the apparently unseen. And when it was there in his photos it was *more than visible.*

Yesterday he joined the second train. At the age of ninety-five – with all his agility – he jumped it. He has joined his inspiration. Six years ago he wrote something about inspiration: 'In a world collapsing under the weight of the search for profit, invaded by the insatiable sirens of Techno-science and the greed of Power, by globalization and the new forms of slavery – beyond all of this, friendship and love exist.' He wrote this in his own handwriting, which was open like a lens which has no shutter.

Bullshit! I now hear him saying. Look at my drawings, there is no second train in them!

So I look at some reproductions of some of his drawings. How drawings change – even twenty-four hours after a death; their tentativeness disappears, they become final. He said repeatedly in his later years that photography no longer interested him as much as drawing. Drawing – or anyway drawing as he drew – has less to do with the sense of sight than with the sense of touch, with touching the substance and energy of things, with touching the enigma of life without thinking about eternity or the second train. Drawing is a private act. Yet Cartier-Bresson returned to it, knowing very well that it was an act of solidarity with both those who see the second train and those who don't.

That's better, he says.

An epitaph for him? Yes, a photo he took in Mexico in 1963. It shows a small girl in a deserted street carrying a framed daguerreotype portrait of a beautiful and serene woman which is almost as large as the child. Both are about to disappear behind a tall fence. The last second of visibility, but not of the woman's serenity or the girl's eagerness.

2004

Between Here and Then

Marc Trivier

My son, Yves, made a drawing of a clock when he was thirteen. The clock was manufactured in Ansonia, Connecticut, towards the end of the nineteenth century. The manufacturing company – according to the label found inside the clock, when you open the door to wind it up – specialized in 'time pieces for ships, steamboats, locomotives and dwellings'. On the glass of the clock's little door is engraved an image of an ancient hive with bees flying around it. A beehive is a traditional, originally Greek, symbol for the natural passing of time. Beverly inherited the clock from her father, Howe Bancroft.

When Howe died in 1985, I wrote these lines about him.

I know you
by my ignorance
and its space
which shyly
you filled with quotations

I know you
by the half smile of your reticence
and the space

of a pride
you hid in patched sleeves

I know you by the moment before death
and the space
of God
you found in the lament of words

I know you
by your daughter
and the space
of the words
between here and then

The clock stands on the mantelpiece of the high chimney in our kitchen. I can only reach it, my hands above my head, standing on tiptoe beside the stove. It needs winding up about every two and a half days, every sixty hours. Once it used to chime but the mechanism is broken. It keeps good time when the weight on the brass pendulum is properly adjusted.

Sometimes I forget to wind it up. When it stops, however, the inhabitual silence in the kitchen – which is the room we live in most of the time – attracts my attention and, standing on tiptoe, I open its door and rewind the mechanism with the key, kept on the mantelpiece to the right of the clock. Then with my forefinger I tap the pendulum gently to the left (never to the right), the ticking re-begins, and I invariably have the sensation that the kitchen, which was holding its breath during the silence, is breathing normally again.

A room needs an awareness of the passing of human time. Otherwise it risks becoming inanimate. Or, to be more accurate, its silence risks becoming inanimate. My ritual, of reaching up to the clock high above my head, is like putting a bowl of water down on the floor for a silence to drink. Thirsty silences devastate.

One day when I was inattentive while winding it, the foreseeable happened. The clock toppled, and fell between my arms. I was able to break its fall but it landed on the asphalt floor. Asphalt because around the chimney wooden planks would be too dangerous.

The door had come off its hinges, and the mechanism was damaged. It had to go to a clock-maker to be repaired. I knew of one in the next village.

A dark shop with an old woman peeling vegetables behind the counter. A very limited choice of engagement rings. A few silver necklaces with crosses. Some quartz alarm clocks. And at the end of the counter a door that opened on to a clock-maker's deserted workshop. On the workbench I could see tiny, fastidious tools and a couple of eyepieces.

My brother will look at it, says the woman. My husband is now past it; he can't see any more – it's a trade that ruins the eyes. Come back in a month.

Perhaps, I suggest, I could phone in a few days to see whether or not he can fix it?

We never answer the telephone, she replies, but I won't forget – come back in a month.

The kitchen was changed by the absence of the clock. (We could tell the time by the electric digital clock above the oven on the gas stove.) The kitchen breathed less deeply; nevertheless it survived. It was a hard winter, and all day every day finches, some blue tits and a robin came to the windowsill to peck at sunflower seeds. A kind of ticking of bird time, much faster than our time.

When I was next in the clock-maker's village I couldn't believe my eyes. The shop had disappeared! No shop sign, no shop window, no engagement rings. Every window of the building shuttered. I rang the doorbell. Total silence on the other side of the door.

I went to inquire in a neighbouring shop, which was a pharmacy, and the chemist, a very precise man in a white coat, informed me that the clock-maker's family had moved out the week before, taking everything with them in a lorry.

To where?

He had no idea.

You could ask the midwife, he suggested. She might know because she's a cousin; on the other hand, she might pretend she doesn't.

I felt a kind of resignation rising in me, somewhat like the expression on the faces of clocks that no longer tell the time.

Your photos, Marc, propose that an unphotographed world would be like a house without time! They propose that cameras and timepieces are, in some way, complementary.

Ever since its beginning photography has provoked speculations about time. The nostalgia implicit in any photograph. Time stopped in its tracks. The decisive moment. The trace left behind. The photo-finish. Such notions have been much thought about and discussed.

Yet what you propose – or rather the proposal of your black-and-white untampered-with photos – is, I think, somewhat different. Photography and empiricism grew up together – both of them materialist, secular, pragmatic. Whereas you argue for a metaphysical approach. You don't exactly argue. You infiltrate with a metaphysical question.

Your concern is not with the moment, but with the past and future. And you ask a strange question: what happens if (or when) the past and future stop? Does this change the *now*, and if so, how?

Roland Barthes wrote poignantly about the connivance between a photograph and death; both of them stop time, both inflict a *coup* *de grâce*. Your question is about something other. What happens if past and future stop and the present is extended indefinitely? What happens in the silence of a kitchen without a clock?

The sitters in nearly all of your portraits are looking for an answer to this question. Continuous, normal human time has just left and they, eyes fixed on the doorway through which it departed, are either celebrating or waiting for its return.

I see two exceptions – one is Jean Genet, who's listening to bird time, and the other is Bram van Velde, to whom the same thing has happened many times before, so that when it happens again, he thinks about Spinoza.

Each of the other sitters is distinctly her- or himself. Each *now* in each life is unique. But the way the past and future have been arrested is the same for all of them, and they are all listening to the silence which follows this arrest.

Sometimes you juxtapose one of these portraits with an image taken in an abattoir. This is shocking but not arbitrary. For the photographed animals past and future are about to be felled in a single blow; their arrest will not be a speculative one, but physical and final. No questions are being asked. The abattoir images, however, force us to think about sacrifice, and as soon as we start speculating about the past and future, the notion of sacrifice is inseparable from the notion of survival. (One of the surprising things about abattoirs is the sense of continuity they exude.)

The way you place your abattoir photos reminds me of the way certain Renaissance painters sometimes placed a skull on a table or shelf, with the consent of the sitter, when painting a portrait.

As I write these words I'm listening to the ticking of the clock made in Ansonia. Two months had passed and one day the clockmaker's wife phoned. Your clock is repaired, she said, it took so long because there was a small piece we couldn't find a replacement for. If you fix a time, my brother will deliver it to you.

He came, and naturally I invited him in for a coffee. Together we installed the clock on the mantelpiece and set it in motion. Its ticking made the silence of the kitchen sigh. I settled the bill. It cost a lot.

I've never in my life seen another timepiece quite like it, the brother said. Would you mind if I took a photo of it up there?

Of course not, I replied.

He went out to his car to fetch his camera. And I sat at the table listening again to time passing.

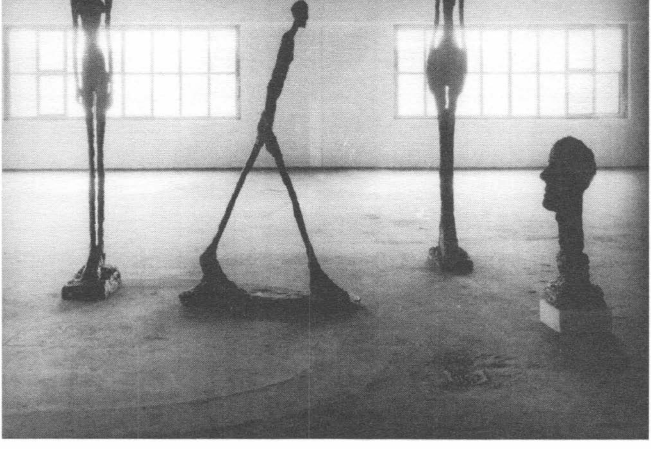
Your last book you called *Paradise Lost*. The title was accompanied by an image like that of a reflection in a driver's rear mirror – an image that is being left behind. An orchard and the long shadows of two people. Paradise was before any past or future existed. There was no question of stopping them because they hadn't started.

Understanding this, I see that your vision as a photographer begins with the notion of an impossible return. What has made us human, what makes us what we are, is our awareness of past and future. Consequently we are no longer fit for paradise. In fact there'll be nobody there. And as the Arab saying puts it: a paradise without people is not worth stepping into.

Arresting past and future may, though, be a way of momentarily entering eternity. The opposite of the eternal is not the ephemeral but the forgotten.

The repaired clock, for the first time in my hearing, has just chimed.

[written *c.*2005]



Marc Trivier: *My Beautiful*

Marc Trivier's photographs of Giacometti's sculptures are not what they first appear to be. They are not 'reproductions' of the sculptures, as in a good art catalogue. They do not record, they collaborate. Instead of facing the sculptures, the photographer put himself, and his talent for waiting with the camera, beside them. Then they all turn and advance in an Indian file. The sculptures leading and the photographs following behind, often stepping into the same footprints.

Maybe these words can join the file.

I remember two stories. The first about Trivier, the second about Giacometti. Marc was taking his photos and shifting the sculptures around a lot in order to find the place and light each one needed. Each time he carried *Annette* (see p. 194), who is only 60cm high, he found himself holding her tight against his chest. He couldn't keep her at arm's length, and this he found surprising.

One day somebody asked Alberto: When your sculptures finally have to leave the studio, where should they go? To a museum? And he replied: No, bury them in the earth, like that they may be a bridge between the living and the dead.

The light in the photograph of a single leg is like the light in an indoor swimming pool. I learnt to swim in such a pool in

Eastbourne with my father. There was a lifebelt hanging on the wall of white tiles and on it was printed Eastbourne Town Council. I think I learnt to read easily and to swim in the same year – 1931.

After 1945 Giacometti's sculptures of people (and a cat and a dog) became thinner and thinner and so it was concluded that they were on the point of disappearing. Trivier doesn't see them like that; for him they are at the point of arrival, they have just appeared. *Annette* arrives at the same instant as he considers her. *Annette is* the attention she is attracting. The truth of this has something to do with desire but it is too soon to speak of it.

Annette is persistent. She does not allow us to leave easily. She does not look at us. We have to imagine her doing so. It is partly for this that we stay.

In the Indian file I spot Katrin. Here is a photo of her. I pinned it to the wall above my working table after she died.

Katrin Cartlidge, actress. We often discussed the parts she was playing or was about to play in a film or on the stage. Each time she performed a role I had the impression she was playing one of her hundred previous lives. Her hundred very distinct lives, which meant she was familiar with a hundred very distinct wounds. When she sent me an SMS she signed off with the name – Wing. It had something to do with a joke between us.

About two months after her entirely unexpected death, I had the impression, when I pictured her in my mind, that she was withdrawing or had withdrawn. (I'm not sure whether this happened gradually or in a quantum leap; I suspect the latter.) She was no less present but her way of being present was altered. Previously she would be there in a particular place or context, which changed from day to day. A street market or a path through a wood, or she was asleep on a train, or she was reading out loud in a café something I'd written, or she was laughing fit to kill herself on a staircase. Now she seemed to be in several places at the same moment. No, more than that: she was at the same moment in a multitude of places or lives such as I couldn't envisage. Couldn't, not through a lack of imagination on my part, but through a lack of magnanimity. Her presence was as precise as before but it had become unlimited. Her *here* had become everywhere.

Now she's interrupting:

Sweetheart! That sounds good but it's not accurate. You're not in a position to say *here* about where I am!

I should say *there*?

It would be better, Sweetheart, or you could say *here* and *here* and *here* and *here* and *here* and *here* – and never stop!

Like a frog!

Laughter. Then words spoken quietly. (Her frequent laughter often led to a quiet.)

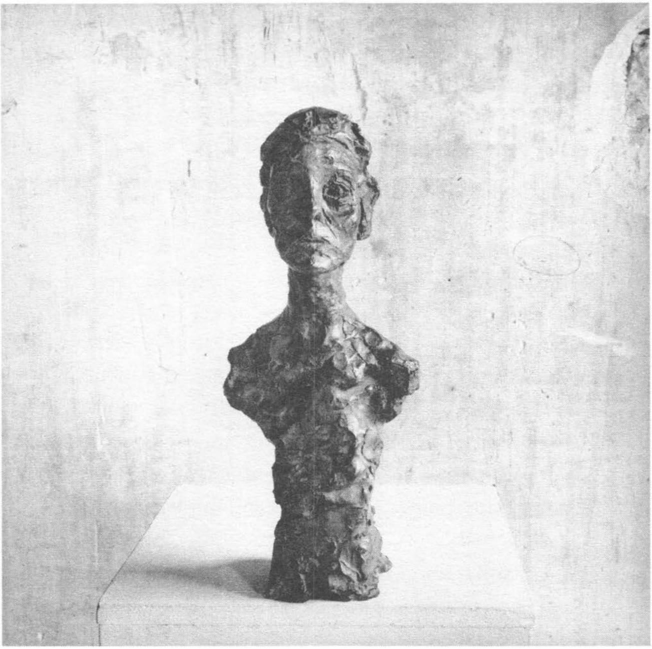
The word *or* implies a choice and I no longer have to choose, John. I've replaced the word *or* with the word *and* and I love it. Isn't *and* the word both *Annette* and I make you think of?

> *And* is neither a relation nor really a conjunction, it subtends all relations, is their flow, is what allows them to overspill beyond their boundaries, beyond what can be thought of as Being, beyond One or All.

Those words are not mine but Gilles Deleuze's. He loved collaborations and a multitude of voices.

The resemblance between *Annette* and Katrin is striking. The holding of their heads, the pits of their two necks where they join their chests, the swivel of their chins, the direct current, the charge, running between their faces and bodies – all this is similar. But their resemblance comes from something deeper. In the bronze statue and in the black-and-white snapshot, each of them has left behind everything; each of them has brought nothing but herself. This irreducibility is what they have in common.

The irreducible was Giacometti's ideal. His figures are there,



with what is left after air and light and usage have dispersed with the rest. They are like skeletons? The opposite. They concern what anatomy can never categorize or identify. They show how, in the depths of a body, there is an interface, a shared skin between the physical and metaphysical.

Most portraits in the history of art refer first to the gender and class and milieu to which their sitters belonged, and secondly to what was particular and unique about the particular person posing. Doña Cobos de Porcel in Goya's portrait of her is first a woman, an aristocrat, a desperado of the First Spanish Civil War, and then she is Isabel with her fateful, special attraction towards what may harm her. Each of Giacometti's sculptured portraits seems to present an irreducible self, who only then happens to be woman or man, old or young, philosopher or gangster's moll. Each of his portraits is like a first name cast in bronze.

Annette.

When discussing the Stoic philosophers, Gilles Deleuze wrote:

> Between physical things in depth and the surfaces of metaphysical events, there is a strict complementarity.

Jump from the Stoic philosophers, referred to by Gilles, into the municipal swimming pool. Not the one in Eastbourne but another in the Parisian suburb of Fresnes, where the notorious Maison d'Arrêt is.

People of all ages go to the pool. Fathers take their sons. Quite a number of regulars go alone. They may nod to one another. Sometimes there are seven swimmers, sometimes seventy. It depends upon the day of the week, the hour and the season. The kids address their fathers. Otherwise words are deemed superfluous.

Most of the swimmers wear dark goggles to protect their eyes from the chlorine. Bonnets are obligatory – even for the bald. Everybody is concentrated on the act of swimming. Some dive in. Others step slowly down a ladder. They swim in order to keep healthy, to lose weight, to exercise their hearts, for the pleasure of being in the water, or for the odd and deep pleasure of carrying out something private and alone in company! Occasionally there's a swimmer who is dreaming of becoming a local champion. Everyone swims side by side, length after length, each following her or his own unmarked, narrow channel.

When you climb out, you notice, if you've been swimming like me without goggles, a slight haze around those still swimming or those leaving the pool to have a shower before dressing and drying their hair. The haze comes from your sore eyes, yet I like to believe it may also have something to do with thought. I've never accepted that thinking only clarifies; it fills an emptiness too. Thought has its own opacity.

The standing or striding figures in the swimming pool at Fresnes when I watch them are as blurred as are Giacometti's standing and striding figures in one of Marc's photos.

A tall young man under a shower soaping his long legs. A middle-aged woman holding on to the pool's edge, looking concentratedly at the water, which reaches her collarbones, as if it's a book she's reading. A man of my age swimming the crawl slowly towards his past. An eleven-year-old walking along the side of the pool savouring the treasure of her hips.

There's no place for sexiness here, the location doesn't allow it. It's a place where there's a lot of Desire – and many desires – but sexiness is elsewhere.

I imagine the young man, the portly woman, the septuagenarian, the eleven-year-old, whom I have just described, returning to their private lives and being recognized and welcomed by someone with whom they are intimate.

My beautiful.

Sexual desire, when reciprocal, is a plot, hatched by two, in the face of, or in defiance of, all the other plots which determine the world. It is a conspiracy of two.

The plan is to offer to the other a reprieve from the pain of the world. Not happiness but a physical reprieve from the body's huge liability towards pain.

Within all desire there is pity as well as appetite; the two, whatever their relative proportion, are threaded together. Desire is inconceivable without a wound.

If there were any unwounded in this world, they would live without desire.

The human body has prowess, grace, playfulness, dignity and countless other capacities, but it is also intrinsically tragic – as is no animal's body. (No animal is naked.) Desire longs to shield the desired body from the tragic it embodies, and what is more it believes it can.

The conspiracy is to create together a place, a locus, of exemption, and the exemption, necessarily temporary, is from the unmitigated hurt which flesh is heir to.

The *locus* is the inside of the other's body. The conspiracy consists of passing into the other, wherein each will be unfindable. Desire is a movement of hiding-places being exchanged. (To reduce this to a 'desire to return to the womb' is a trivialization.)

Touch a leg with a lover's hand. Whether to arouse or calm makes no difference. The touch seeks to reach further than femur, tibia or fibula, to the leg's very core, and the entire lover hopes to follow that touch and to reside there. Giacometti's leg of the Eastbourne baths is about (among other things) Desire.

There is no altruism in desire. From the start, two bodies are involved, and so the exemption, when and if achieved, covers both. The exemption is bound to be brief and yet it promises all. The exemption abolishes brevity – and along with it the hurts associated with the threat of the brief.

Observed by a third person, desire is a short parenthesis; experienced from within, it is an immanence and an entrance into a plenitude. Plenitude is usually thought of as an amassing. Desire reveals that it is a stripping away: the plenitude of a silence, a darkness.

I think of the legend of the Golden Fleece. (It granted an exemption from a sacrifice.) It lies hanging in its hiding-place, curly, inviolate, complete, worn by nobody. When Marc held *Annette* against his chest, she became a Golden Fleece. See her silhouette in the photo.

*

I once did a drawing of Andrei Platonov from a picture in a newspaper. Maybe the drawing came from some of his words too. Words which, for me, had to be translated since he wrote in Russian. A muttered Russian of the small hours. He was born in Voronezh in 1899 and he died in Moscow in 1951. At the bottom of the drawing I stuck a train ticket and wrote a sentence from one of his stories: 'He went far away for a long while – perhaps for ever.'

Andrei has now joined the Indian file and Katrin is listening to him talking as he follows her.

In a book entitled *Djann* he tells the story of a group of nomads who have ended up in a salt desert (desolate) somewhere near the Sea of Aral in Uzbekistan. They have lost everything – means of survival, possessions, cattle, any notion of the future and all illusions.

He wrote the book in 1935 and it was first published after his death in the 1960s. Andrei Platonov was an errant poet of sharing and penury. To share, he once said, gives you back a sense of the real. I can't hear what he's saying to Katrin. He believed that ultimate losers are loved yet don't know it, and that in this ignorance of theirs, there is something more sacred than anything else on earth.

In the middle of the story, one night before the onset of the merciless winter, the principal protagonist overhears a man and woman whispering in their bare hut.

> We are both good for nothing, says the woman, you are thin and useless, as for me my breasts are withered and there's a pain in the marrow of my bones.
>
> I won't stop loving what's left of you, says the man.
>
> They say nothing else. Doubtless they are lying together so as to hold in their hands their one happiness.

I won't stop loving what's left of you.

The extremity of these eight words is close to the extremity of *Annette*'s stance.

Not long ago I was in Firenze. Snow was falling on the Duomo, and the Arno running under the bridges was the colour of an old skull. The city was as cold as a garrison town in winter. Usually the weather and all the produce from the Tuscan hills mask the fact that Firenze was (is) the sharpest, the least indulgent of the great Italian cities.

At a certain moment I took refuge from the icy streets in the Museo del Bargelo and there I came upon a coloured porcelain head of a young saint – or is she an angel? – by Luca della Robbia. He made it when he was in his sixties. It has only three colours. A flaxen ochre for her or his hair, a sorrel green for the collar of the tunic, and the inimitable della Robbia blue for the tunic itself and his or her cap. The flesh is porcelain white. How to describe the della Robbia blue? It combines an Aegean Sea with the Madonna's robe, it promises Memory; it is the blue of music. The colours have nothing to do with life but the angel is lifelike.

When Luca was younger, before the family business of making coloured busts and reliefs and medallions to make the city seem more innocent than it was had got under way, he was Donatello's equal as a sculptor in bronze. His *Singing Gallery*, a sequence of high reliefs about musicians, singers and dancers making music, is amazing. I know of no other work which shows so precisely in its depiction of bodies the power of music to carry away players and listeners. When you look at it, you think that Elvis, Jim Morrison, Miles, Bird, Ferré or Piotr were already announced in bronze at the beginning of the Quattrocento.

Luca has joined the file and Andrei is explaining to him that his father worked on the railways as an engine-driver and that he himself, before he became an engineer, studied at the Railway Polytechnic.

Luca della Robbia was an exact contemporary of the painter Masaccio. The latter died at the age of twenty-nine and the former lived to the age of eighty-two. Masaccio's fresco of Adam and Eve in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, which is ten minutes' walk away from the Museo del Bargelo, is one of the most eloquent evocations ever of how the human body is intrinsically tragic.

Luca is now talking to Katrin. She has green eyes.

The angel was beautiful. I'm thinking of her presence, not about the outcome of some struggle to make art. I did a drawing to try to understand better the expression of her face. And while I was drawing her expression, I understood something quite different.

Her face assures you that you're being looked at by her. Beauty here is not what you enjoy looking at but what you want to be looked at by! Beauty is the hope of being recognized by, and included within, the existence of what you're looking at.

This hope of being looked at and recognized doesn't only occur before portraits of sexy Florentines. A lion drawn in the dark on a rock face thirty thousand years ago offers, apart from the elegance of his profile, an inclusion in the world in which he exists. And the same is perhaps true when the beautiful is not man-made, when it is found in a sunset, a plant, an animal, a mountain. Any of these is beautiful when they answer the same hope as the angel's face seemed to do.

We are waiting for *Annette* to look.

Stop reading. Find the photo. Her body is looking straight at us.

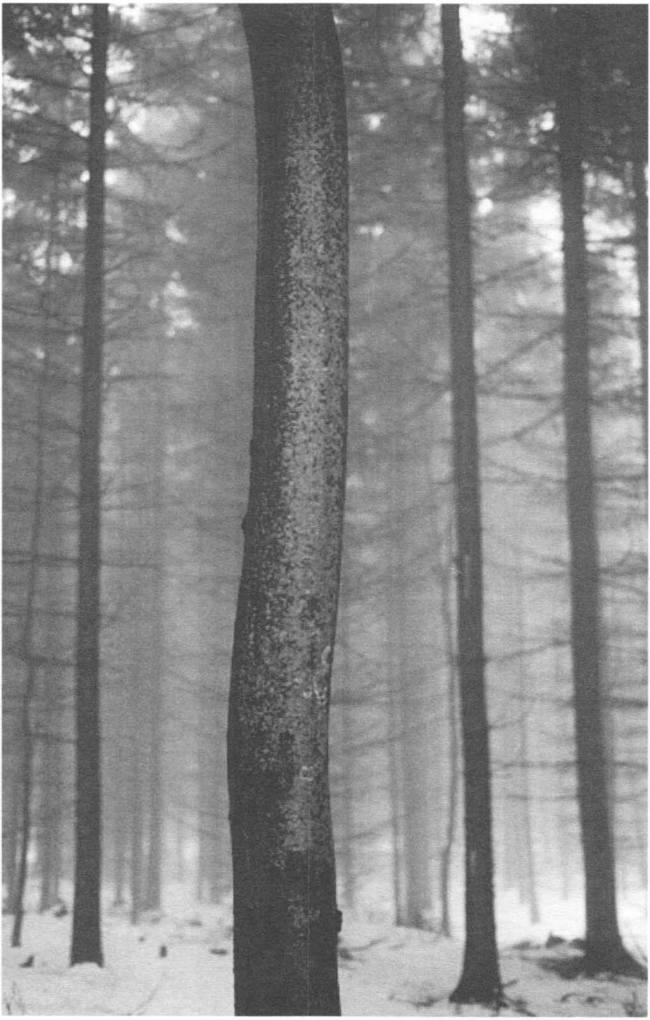
Giacometti and Trivier in *My Beautiful* search for a zone of experience where a coming-into-view is the equivalent of a meeting. Or, to put it another way: both testify, not to a state of being, but to a shared movement of becoming. Both leave behind them a gesture of stepping, not forwards but towards. Stepping towards, with legs and a looking and a tongue and a listening and a solitude.

Last week, Mélina, my granddaughter, learnt to walk.

Such a zone of experience is entered innumerable times every day. In Fresnes and in Firenze. Everywhere. Yet each entry bears a different first name, and the zone itself remains nameless.

My beautiful.

2004



Jitka Hanzlová: *Forest*

> The way I go is the way back to see the future.
>
> Jitka Hanzlová

The forest in question is far away, near the Carpathian mountains, beside the Czech village where she lived as a child. The images could be of another forest, but not for Jitka. Over the years she has returned to hers. She goes into it alone, and if not alone does not take pictures.

Many nature photographs are like fashion photos. This is not to dismiss them; they record and admit pleasure. Mountaintops, waterfalls, meadows, lakes, beech trees in autumn, are asked to stand there, wearing themselves and giving the camera a moody look. And why not? They are reminders of the pleasure of at last arriving after hours in airports. Nature as hostess.

In Jitka's pictures there is no welcome. They have been taken from the inside. The deep inside of a forest, perceived like the inside of a glove by a hand within it.

She speaks of the between-forest. This is because, in the same valley as her village, there are two forests which join. Yet the preposition *between* belongs to forests in general. It's what they are about. A forest is what exists between its trees, between its dense undergrowth and its clearings, between all its life cycles and their different time scales, ranging from solar energy to insects that live for a day. A forest is also a meeting-place between those who enter it and something unnameable and attendant, waiting behind a tree or in the undergrowth. Something intangible and within touching distance. Neither silent nor audible. It is not only visitors who feel this attendant something; hunters and foresters who can read unwritten signs are even more keenly aware of it.

> I went to the forest-hills early in the morning when the forest awakes. Standing there I breathed in the wind, the unruffled voices of the birds and the silence which I love. And then when I was concentrating on a picture, I stopped hearing the silence around me. It was as if I was somewhere else, like in a film. The forest started to move and, as I looked through the camera, I experienced fear. Maybe it was just the framing and the stillness of the evening. As if the birds and the crickets had stopped their singing, as if the wind had come to a stop in the valley. Nothing, but nothing to hear. No birds, no wind, no people, no crickets. The darkness of the light and this other silence made my hair stand on end . . . I could not exactly place the fear, but it was coming from the inside. It was the first time I felt this so intensely, but not the last. I escaped! What's the basis of this fear of mine? Why? I'm not afraid of animals or of the forest. The place is safe.

Throughout history and prehistory forests have offered shelter, a hiding-place, while also being places in which a wanderer can be ultimately lost. They oblige us to recognize how much is hidden.

It's a commonplace to say that photographs interrupt or arrest the flow of time. They do it, however, in thousands of different ways. Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment' is different from Atget's slowing down to a standstill, or from Thomas Struth's ceremonial stopping of time. What is strange about some of Jitka's forest photos – not her photos of other subjects – is that they appear to have stopped nothing!

In a space without gravity there is no weight, and these pictures of hers are, as it were, weightless in terms of time. It is as if they have been taken *between* times, where there is none.

What is intangible and within touching distance in a forest may be the presence of a kind of timelessness. Not the abstract timelessness of metaphysical speculation, nor the metaphorical timelessness of cyclic, seasonal repetition. Forests exist in time, they are, God knows, subject to history; and today many are catastrophically being obliterated for the quick pursuit of profit.

Yet in a forest there are 'events' which have not found their place in any of the forest's numberless time scales, and which exist between those scales. What events? you ask. Some are in Jitka's photographs. They are what remains unnameable in the photographs after we have made an inventory of everything that is recognizable.

The ancient Greeks named events like these *dryads*. My lumberjack friends from Bergamo refer to the forest as a separate kingdom, a 'realm' on its own. Wilfredo Lam painted equivalent events in his imagined jungle. Yet let's be clear. We are not talking about fantasies. Jitka spoke of the forest's silence. The diametric opposite of such a silence is music. In music every event that occurs is accommodated within the single seamless time scale of that music. In the silence of the forest, certain events are unaccommodated and cannot be placed in time. Being like this they both disconcert and entice the observer's imagination: for they are like another creature's experience of duration. We feel them occurring, we feel their presence, yet we cannot confront them, for they are occurring for us, somewhere between past, present and future.

The philosopher Heidegger, for whom a forest was a metaphor for all reality – and the task of the philosopher was to find the *Weg*, the woodcutters' path, through it – spoke of 'coming into the nearness of distance' and I believe this was his way of approaching the forest phenomenon I am trying to define. Just as Jitka's formulation is another. 'The way I go is the way back to see the future.' Both reverse the hourglass.

To make sense of what I'm suggesting it is necessary to reject the notion of time that began in Europe during the eighteenth century and is closely linked with the positivism and linear accountability of modern capitalism: the notion that a single time, which is unilinear, regular, abstract and irreversible, carries everything. All other cultures have proposed a coexistence of various times surrounded in some way by the timeless.

Return to the forests that belong to history. In Jitka's one there is often a sense of waiting, yet what is it that is waiting? And is waiting the right word? A patience. A patience practised by what? A forest incident. An incident we can neither name, describe nor place. And yet is there.

The intricacy of the crossing paths and crossing energies in a forest – the paths of birds, insects, mammals, spores, seeds, reptiles, ferns, lichens, worms, trees, etc., etc. – is unique; perhaps in certain areas on the seabed there exists a comparable intricacy, but there man is a recent intruder, whereas, with all his sense perceptions, he came from the forest. Man is the only creature who lives within at least two time scales: the biological one of his body and the one of his consciousness. (This is perhaps what grants him his sixth sense.) Every one of the crossing energies operating in a forest has its own time scale. From the ant to the oak tree. From the process of photosynthesis to the process of fermentation. In this intricate conglomeration of times, energies and exchanges there occur 'incidents' that are recalcitrant incidents, unaccommodated in any time scale and therefore (temporarily?) waiting *between*. These are what Jitka photographs.

The longer one looks at Jitka Hanzlová's pictures of a forest, the clearer it becomes that a breakout from the prison of modern time is possible. The dryads beckon. You may slip between – but unaccompanied.

2005

Ahlam Shibli: *Trackers*

First, a distinction between being simple and simplifying. The former has something to do with reducing or being reduced to the essential. And the latter – simplification – is usually part of a manoeuvre in some struggle for power. Simplifications are self-serving. Most political leaders simplify, while the powerless react simply to what is happening. There is often an abyss between the two.

Now let's look at Ahlam Shibli's photographs without making simplifications. They offer, among other things, a political lesson and are, in this sense, exemplary. But we'll come to that later. She calls the sequence of pictures *Trackers*, and this requires an explanation.

There are one million Palestinians today living with official papers, as underclass citizens, in the state of Israel. In the media they are described as Israeli-Arabs. They are never referred to as Palestinians. Among the Israeli-Arabs are Bedouin families.

From these families a small number of men – less than a hundred a year – volunteer to join the Israeli army, where they will be trained and used as military scouts, who are known as trackers. The trackers, who are exclusively 'Israeli-Arabs', do much of the army's dangerous field-reconnaissance work. It is they who are sent ahead, whenever the Command reckons there may be resistance, to clear a terrain of land-mines, snipers, possible ambushes. The trackers are initially trained together in groups of about twenty or thirty.

Once trained, they are separated out and allotted alone to units of the Israeli Defence Force, or the IDF as the army calls itself.

After three years' service, a tracker may volunteer again to become a professional soldier, whereby he will be very much better paid. The IDF Command accept only a small number of such volunteers. The professional trackers have an advantage over Israeli soldiers because of their familiarity with local customs, habits and ways of calculation.

Ahlam Shibli's pictures are discreet, elusive and persistent. They contain the minimum of general information and they never report about incidents or events. One has the impression that each one has been taken just after something has happened. Not because Shibli was too slow, but because what interests her is *affect.* Events, as such, do not (at least in this project) concern her; the impact of an event on a life does. And so she is prepared to wait.

She watches the military training of the trackers, trackers going on leave, a cemetery with soldiers' graves, the taking of an oath of allegiance to the IDF sworn on the Koran, the interior of a house with family pictures on the wall, new houses being slowly built thanks to the professional army pay the trackers are earning. Each different location leads slyly to a query. For these men what constitutes a home? Or, more slyly: to where and what do they have a sense of belonging?

There is never anybody there in the picture to tell us what happened just before it was taken. All we can do is to look at the participants who remain and then guess for ourselves and, like Shibli, wait. The effect of the whole series (eighty-five photos) is cumulative. They fit together to make a whole. Yet what does the whole add up to?

For Bedouin the issue of home and what constitutes a home is as entwined as a rope. Traditionally they are a nomadic people. Two or three generations ago, particularly in the Sinai, many Bedouin families became sedentary, yet the land they settled on belonged to somebody else, and on it they had minimal rights. A confused situation in which atavistic memories perhaps play a part. For nomads, home is not an address, home is what they carry with them.

What do the trackers carry?

Ahlam Shibli is soul-searching. Yet she avoids soulfulness and never seeks a confession. She watches patiently from the side. One might say she was a storyteller, yet this would be to simplify her chosen role. (There are great photographic storytellers – André Kertész, for example.) Ahlam Shibli, I would say, is a fortune-teller. She observes intensely, reads the signs, guesses and proffers her prophecy which, like a soothsayer's, is both sharp and unclear; it lays out the chances like playing cards, yet doesn't select one.

Select three. In the first, three trackers, sheltering, take a rest, and one of them is writing something on a public wall. In the second, a man asleep in the daytime, has pulled a cover over his face. In the third are the photos a tracker has framed of himself as an IDF warrior, on a wall in his house, beside an old map of Palestine.

In each one, differently expressed, is the same dilemma concerning identity and whereabouts.

What are they carrying?

Traditionally, and over the centuries, nomadic Bedouin clans have offered their services to any invading force – be it Egyptian, Turkish, British – whenever they recognized that they themselves, with all their guerrilla skills, were nevertheless outflanked. They did this, however, to avoid being disbanded and in order to remain independent, unchallengeable on their own, almost impenetrable territories. It was a cunning strategy for continuity, which often succeeded.

Today the circumstances for Israeli Bedouins have become very different. They have been hounded off their land and stripped of their economic means of survival. In their own Negev Desert they are treated as criminal trespassers, and their crops are sprayed with herbicide from IDF helicopters.

To grasp finally what this means we have to take account of the extremity of the Palestinian situation in general. The Palestinian–Israeli conflict has lasted nearly sixty years. The military occupation of Palestine – the longest in history – has lasted nearly forty years. Scarcely necessary to repeat all the facts that this occupation entails, for they have been internationally recognized and condemned. The Palestinian economy and everyday life have been reduced to rubble. The illegal Israeli settlements encroach upon and devour Palestinian land each week. The illegal Wall, implacably advancing, is dividing up what remains of that land into future 'Bantustans'. East Jerusalem, occupied and transformed into an Arab ghetto, is being dismantled piecemeal.

What is sometimes forgotten about this continuing conflict – for the Palestinians continue to resist – is the disparity, the inequality of means, whether in terms of firepower or defence. The IDF are armed with everything that modern technology can supply, from helicopters and guided missiles to surveillance cameras and computerized tracking methods, whereas the Palestinians have recourse to small arms, home-made explosives, a few mortars, occasional suicide martyrs, and stones. Their single advantage is their enduring faith in the justice of what they are defending. Against this, the state of Israel, besides enlisting a few Bedouin trackers, enjoys the unconditional support of the world's first megapower, the USA.

Such a disparity of resources and arms recalls the mid-twentieth-century colonial wars of liberation, and if we want to understand the trackers' dilemma we could not do better than consult the writings of Frantz Fanon, who was a visionary prophet of those struggles. At the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, he writes: 'At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognise, with me, the open door of every consciousness.' (Ahlam Shibli, writing about her *Trackers*, refers often to Frantz Fanon.)

As a doctor and psychiatrist from Martinique working in Algeria, Fanon explained how colonial domination, how the disparity of means between the invader and the indigenous, how the contempt inwritten into every encounter between the armed and the unarmed, besides producing revolt, can also lead to a gash in those allegiances which maintain a person's sense of self. And that this happens most frequently and woundingly among the poorest and the most underprivileged of the trampled-on.

An image may help to make this more clear. Consider the opposite syndrome, which is that of the megalomaniac. Every encounter with another person works for the megalomaniac like a held-up mirror in which he sees himself reflected and decked out in his own glory. For the colonized, who has lost his sense of self, every encounter is a mirror in which he sees nothing but a soiled djellaba. Both held-up mirrors hide the other as she or he really is. And so it happens that the colonized, in order to disassociate himself from the soiled djellaba, dreams of wearing the uniform or carrying the flag of his oppressor. Not his enemy, his oppressor.

The Bedouin are among the most underprivileged of Palestinians and they have lost, for the most part, their nomadic liberty and the pride that went with it. So it can happen, as Fanon foresaw, that they split themselves in two, and tearing themselves apart, wear the mask of their oppressors. Many change their names from Ahmed to José, from Mohammed to Moshe. Yet, in doing this, the trackers do not refind their own bodies, their noble bodies that are calumnied by the false image of the soiled djellaba.

The man with the bedcover pulled over his head is dreaming of what? One can never guess at what somebody else is dreaming. *Yet he can probably not guess at his own dream.*

Something like this is what the trackers carry.

*

This work of Ahlam Shibli makes no direct political comment on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it refrains from slogans. Yet I believe that in today's global context it is politically important – or, as I said, exemplary. And I will try to explain why.

Ahlam Shibli herself comes from a Bedouin family. As a young girl she was herding goats in Galilee. Later, after studying at university, she became a photographer of international renown.

Long ago she made the opposite existential choice to the trackers whom she shows in these photos. She believes in the justice of the Palestinian cause and has protested as a patriot and a photographer against the illegal Israeli occupation. For her, as for most Palestinians, the trackers can be considered traitors. They have joined an army which is oppressing the Palestinian people and they stalk to kill and capture those who actively resist that army. Traitors . . . In certain circumstances, they must be treated as such.

Nevertheless Ahlam Shibli feels a need to go beyond, and search behind, the simplifying label. Because she is a Bedouin herself? Maybe, but the question is naïve. What counts is the result. Because she is Bedouin, she was able to search behind the label and discover what she had to discover. With these photographs she posed the question: what price are they paying for their decision to become trackers? Then she waited for the enigmatic answers which she found in her darkroom. And these she makes public.

How is this political? In the mid-twentieth century Walter Benjamin wrote: 'The state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight.'

Within such a concept of history we have to come to see that every simplification, every label, serves only the interests of those who wield power; the more extensive their power, the greater their need for simplifications. And, by contrast, the interests of those who suffer under or struggle against this blind power are served now and for the long, long future by the recognition and acceptance of diversity, differences and complexities.

These photographs are a contribution to such an acceptance and recognition.

I will end by quoting Frantz Fanon once more:

> No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men. The caravan should not be stretched out, for in that case each line will hardly see those who precede it; and men who no longer recognise each other meet less and less together, and talk to each other less and less . . .

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Editor's note

The closing quotation from Frantz Fanon is taken from *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 314, while the quotation on p. 212 is from *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 181.

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